

Introduction to the Language Situation in Finland

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Introduction

Finnish, as a people and as a language, has always been homogenous. The Nordic country, with a population of about 5.4 million, is the eight largest country in Europe in terms of land area, but at the same time, the most sparsely populated country in the European Union (EU). About 92% of Finland's population are native speakers of Finnish. Finland's other national language is Swedish, which is spoken as a native language by about 6% of Finland's population. The rest of the population speaks one of the other three language minorities recognized in the Constitution, the Saami, the Roma and sign language, or some other language, such as Russian, Estonian, English, Somali, Arabic, Vietnamese or German, as their mother tongue thanks to the constantly increasing immigration. Immigrant languages, however, have no official status even though there are for example publications in these languages and even a Russian-language radio station. Many of them are also taught at all levels of primary and secondary schools. Throughout Finland's history, the language situation has changed together with the political situation. This short article will look at these changes as well as the current language situation and language education policies of Finland. First, a brief political and linguistic history will be provided. Then, the roles of Swedish, Saami and English in the Finnish society will be discussed. Lastly, a short introduction to the policies of foreign language education will be provided.

Linguistic History

Finnish is part of the Uralic language group. Estonian and Hungarian are the most closely related languages to it. Even though Finland did not become an independent republic until 1917, Finnish people, the area, and the language have a long history. Until 1809, Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden. During this period, Finnish had no official status even though it was the mother tongue for part of the population. At the end of the Swedish rule, the speakers of Finnish constituted 22% of the total population (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2000). However, Swedish was the language of elite and education, so Finnish language kept deteriorating. As a result of the Russo-Swedish war during 1808–1809, Sweden had to give up Finland to Russia.

Russia granted Finland the status of an autonomous grand duchy, and the Porvoo Diet in 1809 established Finland as a nation among other nations. Finnish became the majority language of the new grand duchy, but Swedish continued to be the language of government, education, and media during the 19th century. In 1863, Czar Alexander II formulated a language manifesto that granted native speakers of Finnish the right to use their own language in courts and with public authorities. At first, the Russian authorities were very supportive of the Finnish language gaining ground, perhaps because they wanted Finland to break its ties with Sweden. However, the language manifesto of 1900 made Russian the official administrative language, and Finnish speakers were expected to be able to communicate using it. This order was never implemented though because the Finnish authorities did not have sufficient knowledge in Russian, and therefore, Russian never gained an important position in Finland (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2000). According to Mantila (2002), another reason for this was that during the 19th century, there was a widespread Finnish national awakening. The Finnish language and Finland's indigenous culture created a spirit of national identity, which became evident, for example,

in the Finnish national epos *Kalevala*, a collection of folk poetry by Elias Lönnrot. These poems portrayed Finns as historical, mythical heroes, and having no history of kings, war heroes, or political history, it provided confidence for the people of Finland. Finnish as a language also underwent major changes due to the Finnish national awakening. This was partly caused by the members of the Swedish-speaking upper classes and their promotion of Finnish culture and language. Whereas in the past, for example, many Finns had changed their family names into sounding more Swedish or Latin, now people were ‘finnicizing’ their family names. In addition, more people made a point of learning the language and using it at home, and more importantly, making sure their children were learning the language as their mother tongue. The Finnish language at the end of the 19th century can be considered the fully developed modern national language (Mantila, 2002). Finland became independent in 1917. The 1922 Constitution, which was revised in 2000, recognizes Finnish and Swedish as the national languages of Finland. Each Finnish citizen has the right to use their own language when dealing with public authorities, and equal opportunities in education and society must be provided both for the Finnish- and Swedish-speaking citizens. The Saami, the Roma and the users of sign language are the other three official minority language groups mentioned in the Constitution (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2000).

Role of Swedish in Finland

According to the Research Center of Wales (1998), Finland Swedes are the citizens of Finland whose mother tongue is Swedish. Officially, this is about 300,000 people, but in fact, close to 600,000 citizens of Finland use Swedish in their daily life. This number includes the people living in the islands between Finland and Sweden in the autonomous region of Åland, whose citizens actually are an ethnic group by themselves. Finland Swedes primarily live on the southern coast of Finland. The Swedish spoken in Finland, *Finlandsvenska*, differs from the standard Swedish spoken in Sweden and is considered a

Scandinavian Germanic dialect of the language. Most of the Finland Swedes have a good command of Finnish as well. The number of Finland Swedes has gradually decreased, from 17.5% of Finland's population in 1610 to 5.8% in 2005. Many people still believe they are over-represented in the upper classes, but this is slowly changing. However, as mentioned earlier, the Swedish-speaking upper classes were the driving force behind Finland's independence and the recognition of its language. Many influential people in business, politics, and culture still today come from Swedish-speaking families, and therefore, have helped maintain the high status of Swedish (Research Centre of Wales, 1998).

The Language Law enacted in 1921 governs the usage of Finland's two national languages, Finnish and Swedish. In regards to Swedish, it guarantees the right for Finland Swedes to use their mother tongue in any official interaction with the government and public administration. It also stipulates, for example, that all laws must be published in both languages, and that in the military, both languages are official. It also stresses for the equality of rights for the two languages. This equality is considered of high importance for two reasons. First, for national equality it is considered important that the two linguistic communities can understand each other and communicate with each other. Second, Finland is a member of the Nordic Council together with Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Therefore, the knowledge of Sweden is considered important to maintain links with the other member countries, all of whose citizens speak Swedish or another closely related Scandinavian language. Also, the Nordic Council has a regulation stating that all citizens of the Nordic Council member countries should be able to communicate with each other in one of the Scandinavian languages. The Swedish Assembly of Finland also plays an important part in ensuring and improving the rights and interests of the Finnish Swedes, especially in the fields of language, education, and media. The Swedish People's Party, the only political party of Finnish Swedes, has nine members in the current Finnish Parliament. Finland has a

full-scale Swedish-medium school system, including several universities that are monolingual in Swedish. Åbo Akademi, Finland's oldest university, is completely monolingual in Swedish. In addition, one of the most prestigious economics and business universities fully operates in Swedish. There is also a monolingual Swedish social work and public administration college in Finland. Finland Swedes usually have a higher command of Finnish than Finnish have of Swedish because Finland Swedes study Finnish as a foreign language at school much more often and longer than Finnish students do Swedish. There is one national daily newspaper in Swedish and many local ones. In radio, there is one national and six local channels that broadcast only in Swedish. The Swedish TV broadcasting service shares air times with the Finnish speaking channels. Many jobs require Swedish proficiency, especially in business, international jobs and civil servant jobs. All consumer products must be labeled in the two languages. Imported products can be labeled in any one of the Scandinavian languages in addition to Finnish due to an international agreement regarding language equality among the Nordic Council members since these languages are mutually intelligible (Research Centre of Wales, 1998).

Many researchers have said that Finland Swedes are the most privileged minority in Europe. However, others are asking whether they really are a minority since their language has an official status in the country. The Finnish language law has also been complemented as being the best in the world. The strength of it is that it protects the right of the citizens to use their own language, and not only protects the language as an abstract entity. Even though Finland always has had groups of people who are trying to get rid of the compulsory learning of Swedish at schools, there is strong support for the role of Swedish in Finland. Seventy percent of Finland's Finnish-speaking population feel that Swedish is an integral part of Finland's society, and it should stay that way as well. In addition, 73% believe that it would be a loss for the Finnish society if the Swedish language and culture were to disappear from Finland (Research Centre of Wales, 1998).

Role of Saami in Finland

Saami is a language related to Finnish spoken in all Nordic countries and Russia by the Saami people. According to Sammallahti (1998), the total population of Saami in these areas is about 100,000 people while the different varieties of Saami language are spoken by about 20,000 people. It is impossible to discuss the Saami people as one group because they belong to many societies, states and language groups. Finland has a population of about 7,000 Saami, but only about half of them speak the language. Finnish Saami live in Lapland, the northern tip of Finland, in an area of about 10% of Finland's total land area. Three Saami languages are spoken in Finland: Inari, Skolt, and Northern Saami. In 1992, a special Saami Language Act was passed in Finland. This law entitles the speakers of Saami to use their own language with public authorities. In Lapland, primary and secondary school education is available in Saami, and students can take the high school matriculation exam in the language. University studies are also possible in Saami, where a major in Saami language and culture is available. The government has also taken measures to preserve and develop the Saami culture and the people's livelihoods by providing funds to Saami education and training. One example of how the money is used is the Saami radio that has a channel for daily broadcasts in the Saami language. Saami museum was also recently constructed for education and preservation of Saami culture. Other current projects include creating more cultural services such as TV broadcasts in Saami, especially for children, and supporting Saami arts and handicrafts (Sammallahti, 1998).

The Finnish Saami Parliament (1997), however, explains that the Saami people in Finland are a depriving population. They are plagued by net-out migration, high levels of single-parent families, and a reliance on welfare benefits. The main employment amongst Saami men are fishing, trapping, gathering and reindeer herding, all of which are not considered a source of employment in Finland. Women are mainly

homemakers. All through their history, the Saami people have been confronted by hostile outsiders, “from the Tchudes during the Middle Ages, to missionaries in the Seventeenth Century, to the Norwegians, Swedish, and Russians in the 18th century,” (Ricco, n.d.). Most of them also have tried to force Christianity into the Saami culture, somewhat successfully. The traditional Saami religion was a mythological religion that was closely tied to nature. However, now most Saami belong to the Lutheran church of Finland. Also, with the conquerers, all traditional Saami activities became more commercial, which also led to the increased use of the majority languages of Finnish and Swedish amongst the Saami in Finland. In order to participate in this new form of capitalism that now had entered the Saami societies, Saami viewed their own language as an obstacle. They needed to communicate in the majority languages. The whole period from the mid-1800s until World War II was a period of intense political, social and culture repression for the Saami people. Because of this repression, Saami people faced immense pressure to assimilate with the mainstream culture of Finland, and to learn to communicate in Finnish. Speaking only Saami was considered shameful and provided no opportunities for advancement in the society (Sammallahti, 1998). Because of this social pressure, many Saami speakers today are hesitant to teach their children the Saami language because they want to ensure that they are fluent in Finnish and are able to use the opportunities available to them that Finnish proficiency provides them. As Ricco put it, “Parents are very concerned with protecting their children from the stigma of being Saami,” (n.d.). However, with the current governmental efforts of preserving and maintaining the Saami culture and language, many parents are again teaching their children Saami because of the newfound sense of pride. However, they are still making sure that children are learning the language solely for the purpose of using it at home or with other Saami. Also, due to this interest in Saami culture, since 1960, tourism has grown and now over a million people visit the Saami region annually. Although this is bringing in some income for the Saami communities,

most Saami consider this an exploitation of their culture. For example, very few Saami people wear their traditional costumes in public because of the many tourists waiting to take photos of them. Researchers and leaders of Saami communities feel that despite all the effort put into the conservation of Saami culture and language, education is important in maintaining the use of the language because of the small number of native speakers of it (The Finnish Saami Parliament, 1997).

Role of English in Finland

English is overwhelmingly the most popular foreign language studied in Finland. This leads to the assumption that Finnish students think that English is the most important international language. As is the case in most other countries, English is considered *lingua franca* in Finland as well. Many students express a motivation and a desire to study English while at the same time expressing frustration to study Swedish. Björklund and Suni (2000) explain that English is also prominent outside of the classroom. English TV channels and programs are far more popular than Finnish ones, and children's programs and pop music are heavily influenced by the English language. In Finland as well as the other Scandinavian countries, English has gained a higher status, more so than in the rest of the European nations, with the exception of Belgium and the Netherlands perhaps. This may be due to the Scandinavian countries' small size and their reliance on international trade. Another reason in Finland may be the popularity of using subtitles with the huge number of American TV programs shown compared to dubbing that is used in many other European countries. English is also the dominant language in business and science. Nokia, one of the world's largest mobile phone companies from Finland, has adopted English as its official operating language worldwide, including in Finland. The Finnish media takes every chance to criticize the poor English skills of Finnish politicians and business leaders. Academy of Finland, governmental funding body for scientific research, ranks English-language publications more highly than Finnish-language ones

(Björklund and Suni, 2000).

Due to the dominance of the English language in the Finnish society, many researchers see English as a threat to the Finnish language and national culture. However, maybe this is not true for the population of Finland. A recent large-scale study (Leppänen, et al., 2009) of 1495 participants examined the attitudes of Finnish people towards English. The results found that regardless of being a bilingual country, and the participants rating themselves as having a good command of English, Finns see themselves strongly as monolingual. The results also showed that English is present in the lives of Finns daily, mainly in business and public facilities. Using English is common for Finns at work and during their leisure time. The survey showed that Finns have a very positive attitude towards English, and only a small percentage views English as a threat to the Finnish language and culture. English is seen as a positive influence on improving intercultural understanding and relations. According to Mantila (2002), there is much discussion on the impact of English on the Finnish language, especially the lexicon. Loan words are adapted much faster these days than they were in the past, and they often do not have enough time to adjust to the Finnish phonological and morphological systems. Because Finnish is an agglutinative language, adoption of loan words requires inflectional changes. However, the loan words are compatible with only certain inflectional rules, and therefore, loan words from English create problems when adopted to Finnish. In addition, some loan words will change their meaning when adopted to Finnish, which also leads to some more serious problems because when a linguistic image is not rooted in the surroundings where it was produced, then that in turn will produce changes in thinking. The prominence of English in the Finnish society has also many concerned about linguistic inequality, where the power in the society will be in the hands of those who become fluent in the *lingua franca* (Mantila, 2002).

Foreign Language Teaching in Finland

Finnish students, from grade one until grade twelve, study a minimum of two compulsory foreign languages and a maximum of two compulsory and three optional foreign languages. The first compulsory foreign language (FL1) begins in grade three in most cases; according to Pöyhönen (2008), however, in 2005, 8.6% of students started FL1 in grade one, and 14.7% of students started it in grade two. In 2005, 89.5% of the students chose English as their FL1. The students study FL1 for two 45-minute lessons per week on grades 3–7 and three 45-minute lessons per week on grades 8–9. The second optional foreign language (FL2) starts in grade 4 or 5, which students study for two 45-minute lessons per week. In 2005, 28% of students chose an optional FL2. The third compulsory foreign language (FL3) starts in grade 7. If Swedish was not chosen as FL1 or FL2, FL3 must be Swedish in that case. Students study a total of 228 lessons, 171 hours, of FL3. Fourth optional foreign language (FL4) starts in grade 8. The most common languages for FL4 as well as for FL2 are French, Russian, and German. FL4 is also studied for a total of 228 lessons. FL1 and FL3 must be continued in high school while FL2 and FL4 remain optional. It is also possible to begin a fifth optional foreign language (FL5) in grade 9. The amount of language studies in high school for each student are dependent on that student's decision on whether to include them in the matriculation examination at the end of grade 12 (Pöyhönen, 2008).

The current Finnish language education policy was drafted by the governmental Language Program Committee in 1978 after a comprehensive language policy and education survey was conducted. In that document, the aim was set for schools at all levels to make as wide a range of foreign languages as possible available for the Finnish students (Finnish National Board of Education, n.d.). With this policy, Finland was in the forefront of language education in Europe. In 1995, EU's learning and teaching principle was formulated, which stated the objective, "Every EU citizen should have a knowledge of at least two EU

languages in addition to her/his native language,” (Hall, 2007). However, with the 1978 policy by the Language Program Committee, Finland had already been following this EU objective.

Despite the long history of foreign language learning in Finland, many language educators are worried about the recent trends involving language learning and teaching in Finland. They are concerned because of the recent trends have been: 1) foreign languages are learned less, 2) range of foreign languages learned at schools is narrowing, and 3) the time spent learning foreign languages at schools is decreasing. As discussed before, English learning, teaching, and usage continues to grow but other foreign languages are declining. These trends have led to a major government-funded project aiming at encouraging schools and students to teach and to learn a much wider variety of languages (Finnish National Board of Education, 2008). For instance, according to Piri (2001), in 1995, the government outlined a plan called Education and Research, which presented the following seven changes or improvements for foreign language education. First, language education will be developed to stress and to include teaching of principles for lifelong learning. Second, German, French, and Russian languages will be made more widely available at all school levels. Third, other less common foreign languages will be included as optional foreign languages at more schools. Fourth, as research shows that many more girls choose to study optional foreign languages, measures will be taken to try to improve this gender imbalance in language studies. Fifth, measures will be taken to ensure that enough students are learning less common, especially other European, foreign languages. Sixth, immersion programs in foreign languages will be made more readily and widely available. Seventh, more emphasis will be placed in teaching culture together with the foreign language. To achieve this goal, more effort will be placed on ensuring that immigrants play a more important role with this (Piri, 2001).

Conclusion

This short article has provided an introduction to the language history and policies in Finland, languages spoken in Finland, as well as foreign language education in Finland. Even though Finland is officially a bilingual country and most students study several foreign languages, Finns still mainly see themselves as monolinguals, just like they are and see themselves as a very homogenous nation. There is concern over the status of the Finnish language, especially as English continues to become more and more prominent in many fields. With the increasing globalization, people are worried about the possibility that Finnish, like other national languages, may be under threat. Others argue that in the past, national languages were more important as they played an important role in the emergence of nation-states in Europe, like in Finland's case. However, due to globalization, this may not be true anymore, and nation-states and national languages are not as interrelated as they were in the past. It is important to find the balance between national language and the international *lingua franca*. It is important to make sure that all people have access to language education because otherwise, linguistic inequality may become a problem, and all the power in the society may belong to those who have had better opportunities for learning the *lingua franca*. At the same time, it is imperative to make sure that national languages maintain their status, and that people continue to value them. The best way to make sure this happens is for people to use the language, and to be committed in transmitting it and using it. This will ensure that national languages and international *lingua francas* coexist harmoniously.

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