

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

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1. Introduction

The subject of this study is the developments following upon the introduction of the new Skolt Sámi orthography in the early 1970s, considered from the sociolinguistic perspective of language planning. The efforts to implement the new orthography will be seen to be of great importance as constituting significant steps towards establishing the Skolt Sámi literary language. It will be argued that these efforts resulted also in an increased consciousness of cultural identity among the Skolt Sámi, a consciousness whose long term effects may prove to be more significant than the actual literary output facilitated by this orthography. The series of events related to the awakening of this cultural identity in the past two decades will be examined by relating them to some of the key factors of present-day reality, among them the most crucial being the demographic factor.

2. Historical background

The Skolt Sámi people who today inhabit the region to the north and east of Lake Inari close to the Norwegian border have been living there only since 1949. Before that they inhabited the Petsamo district, that belonged until the Peace of Dorpat in 1920 to Russia, and thereafter to Finland. In 1945 the Petsamo area became part of the Soviet Union. It was then that the decision was made by the majority of the Skolt Sámi people to move to Finland: in 1945-6 they went to the south-east of Lake Inari, and a few years later further to the north to where they live at present.¹

The Skolt Sámi community has been in the centre of interest of much research. The most evident reason for such interest lies in their unique history and cultural development. Because of their relative geographical isolation they had been able to maintain their culture practically unchanged and undisturbed up until the Second World War. K. Nickul (1948) was able to study this culture in its unaltered form in 1938. At that time he focussed on the question "how shall an endemic tribal society be adjusted to our society?" (p. 11) This same question has been the objective of numerous later studies² and the attempts to provide answers resulted in important anthropological and sociological findings. It was, however, not until relatively late in the 60s before questions regarding language maintenance and literacy started to surface, causing research to turn its focus from the consequences of resettlement for the survival of an ancient cultural form to the significance of the linguistic aspect of this culture.

When referring to research on the language of the Skolt Sámi, attempts to investigate the phonology of the language are the most relevant because they have lead to the development of the orthography referred to earlier. Here it will suffice to mention the working papers in E. Itkonen *et al.* (1971) where suggestions, with justifications for phonological transcriptions of several Sámi dialects, were put forward. Among them was M. Korhonen's "Ehdotus koltanlapin Suonikylän (nyk. Sevettijärven) murteen

¹ T. Ingold 1976:5.

² P. Peltó (1973), T. Ingold (1976), among others.

fonemaattiseksi transkriptioksi.”³ (pp. 69-86) By 1973 a Skolt Sámi alphabet compiled by Pekka Sammallahti⁴ was introduced to the Skolt Sámi community.

3. Language planning

3.1. Procedures

Language planning has traditionally been classified on the basis of its focus. Accordingly, two types of language planning have been recognized: (i) status planning, and (ii) corpus planning.⁵ J. Cobarrubias (1983) suggested four typical ideologies that may justify decision making when initiating language planning in a particular community.⁶ I shall argue that the kind of language planning relevant in the Skolt Sámi case can best be viewed as a clear example of corpus planning. It involved well-defined attempts to develop a literary language, it established an orthography, and it produced a variety of teaching materials, dictionaries etc. -- in other words, the planning procedures cleared the way for the codifying and elaboration of the linguistic forms of the chosen dialect. The motivation behind these language planning efforts is the ideology of vernacularization, as described by Cobarrubias,⁷ in the Skolt Sámi case the restoration and elaboration of the language. That these processes could lead to allocation of functions to such a degree that the language would gain considerable status at the national level clearly had not been expected prior to the implementation of Skolt Sámi language planning. However, what the government agencies and the academicians involved did expect, along with the speakers of Skolt Sámi, was that official recognition of their language rights would facilitate the development of the Skolt Sámi literary language together with the arresting or at least the slowing of the decline of the indigenous language in the face of the spread and use of Finnish especially in the speech of the young. In this respect, we have to agree with J. Rubin (1983)⁸ who stated that sometimes the dichotomy between the two types of language planning may become blurred: the setting up and implementing of norms for writing, vocabulary use etc. often result in changing the status of that language. Thus expectations concerning enhanced status of the Skolt Sámi language definitely stemmed from the establishing of a new orthography and resulting literary activities (see below).

The Skolt Sámi dialect is by no means homogeneous. It consists of several subdialects,⁹ the Suonikylä subdialect having the most speakers.¹⁰ Thus when selecting a dialect which would supply the actual linguistic forms to be codified in the literary language there was no doubt that the Suonikylä dialect should be used for language planning purposes. This decision was made primarily on the basis of the demographic distribution of Skolt Sámi speakers referred to above.

Following introduction of the new writing system it was incorporated into the elementary school curriculum. Several textbooks together with supporting materials have been published¹¹ and were taught during regular school hours. In 1973 a short grammar

³ The English translation of this title is: “Introduction to the phonological transcription of the Suonikylä (currently Sevettijärvi) dialect”.

⁴ M. Korhonen 1981:64-65.

⁵ The distinction made first by H. Kloss (1969) was to emphasize the focus of planning on the basis either of the status (i.e. the importance) of a language or the allocation of its use. This dichotomy, although challenged (most notably by J. Rubin 1983), has been recognized in most works on language planning.

⁶ These four ideologies are linguistic assimilation, linguistic pluralism, vernacularization, and internationalism (Cobarrubias 1983:63-66). While these types of motivations are claimed to be the ones most frequently occurring, the list should not be considered exhaustive. (*Ibid.*, p. 63)

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁸ J. Rubin 1983:341.

⁹ Korhonen 1981:16.

¹⁰ T. Ingold refers to 395 Skolts who were either born or resettled in the Sevettijärvi area (1976:7).

¹¹ For example, P. Sammallahti (1975), S. Mosnikoff (1977), J. Mosnikoff (1980), among others.

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

In 1978 the first issue of the Skolt Sámi Newsletter was published,¹⁵ containing a bilingual rationale that started with the statement: “Tät löstt lij tue’jjuum tōn diōtt, što saa’mid le’čči jiijjōs löstt, ko’st mij vuāžžap lōkkâd mij aa’sšid.”¹⁶ The Newsletter was published in 350 copies and was sent free to each Skolt home. It appeared four times a year, the last issue coming out in 1986.¹⁷

The above list of materials published in the newly developed orthography is not meant to be a complete one. Two publications, however, have to be added for they signify the culmination of the resulting literary endeavours. The first is a prayerbook, published in 1983;¹⁸ among the names acknowledged in the Introduction are those of two linguists, Pekka Sammallahti and the late Mikko Korhonen. The second publication that has to be mentioned here is the translation of the *Gospel according to John* (1988).¹⁹ This translation was a unique effort involving many from the community; a Committee was formed that was responsible for the translation in connection with which outside experts on linguistic²⁰ as well as religious issues were consulted.

In addition to the literary publications, an important recording also deserves to be mentioned. In 1979 an LP album was made with the title *Sue’nn’jel lee’ud*. It contains 12 traditional Skolt Sámi ballads sung by three singers (speakers of the Suonikylä dialect)²¹ and the text of the ballads was enclosed in the album in both Skolt Sámi and Finnish.

3.2. Attitudes

Concerning attitudes, two points will be mentioned here, both relating to the issue of identity for the Skolt Sámi community. The first of these has to do with the selection of the Suonikylä dialect as the basis of the literary language. As mentioned earlier this was justified by the demographic factor, there being no doubt that this dialect is the most viable one in the Skolt Sámi speech community. And yet it became evident that speakers of other dialects made a special effort to emphasize the differences between their dialect and the one chosen. During my two field trips to Finnish Lapland while working with speakers of the Paatsjoki dialect this attitude was displayed in many ways, most frequently by pointing out items in written form “that would have to be written differently in my dialect.” Even one of the members of the Translating Committee referred to above, a speaker of the Paatsjoki dialect, when working with me in Canada consistently replaced linguistic items from the Suonikylä dialect with items from her own dialect. For example, when asked to put a test-word in the sentence frame *say ... again*, instead of the word *cie’lĕ*. ‘say’ she would use the word *saar*, and whenever there was an alternative vocabulary item in the Paatsjoki dialect, that word was used instead of the Suonikylä equivalent. This insistence on the use of one’s

¹² M. Korhonen *et al.* (1973).

¹³ S. Aikio *et al.* (1974).

¹⁴ A. & S. Aikio (1982).

¹⁵ Satu Mosnikoff was the editor of the Newsletter *Sää’modôâz*.

¹⁶ The English translation of this statement is: “This paper’s purpose is that the Skolts may have their own paper, in which they will be able to read about their own affairs”.

¹⁷ The editor Satu Mosnikoff gave the following explanation (in Finnish): “Kolttauutisten nykyisellä toimituksella ei ole voimavaroja kehittää lehtiä. Uusia toimittajia ei näytä löytävän.” [The present editors of the Skolt Newsletter don’t have the energy to continue the paper. It does not seem likely that it will find other editors.]

¹⁸ *Risttoummi mo’lidva’ke’rjj*. Pieksämäki: Sisälähetysseuran kirjapaino. Raamattutalo.

¹⁹ *Evvan Evažge’lium*. Helsinki: Finnish Bible Society. 1988.

²⁰ On the linguistic issues, the advice of Pekka Sammallahti (University of Oulu) was sought.

²¹ Tyyne Fofanoff, Vassi Semenoja and Helena Semenoff.

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

The second point concerning the attitude issue I wish to refer to here has to be taken more seriously, for it could be considered an impediment to language planning activities in progress. Some of the leading figures in the Skolt Sámi community, speakers of the Suonikylä dialect, showed some suspicion towards outside experts and felt that Skolt Sámi speakers themselves should decide what orthographic symbols they should use and which linguistic forms are truly representative of the language etc.²² It is not my purpose here to go into detail as to the effects of this attitude; suffice it to say that there have been times (especially during the translation of the Gospel) when it was difficult to find the right balance between expert linguistic advice and native language proficiency.

3.3. Consequences

In the Introduction to this overview of the language planning process in Skolt Sámi I mentioned that, mainly because of the demographic factor, the effects of these activities are more significant for the maintenance of the cultural identity of the community than for long term language maintenance. At most, the number of Skolt Sámi speakers does not exceed 600. Many who in the long term will benefit from learning the writing system at school are young children, most are bilingual (with a varying degree of bilingual efficiency in Finnish and Sámi, most of them speaking Sámi in rather restricted domains). While it is doubtful how long the language is going to be used, by exposing the younger generation to it and by reinforcing their cultural heritage through attaching positive values to both language use and Skolt Sámi culture, the identity issue these young people will have to deal with promises to be less problematic in the future. The very fact that the practical utilization of the language (oral or written) does not seem likely to expand into additional domains of life does restrict the scope of the language planning effort. However, it most certainly does exert positive reinforcement on the cultural identity of the speakers. And this already has had noticeable manifestations: a renewed interest in traditional activities, such as the regular handicraft courses where traditional bead embroidery is pursued and taught to younger people, and even to non-Sámi people. Another example of strong positive identity feeling is represented by a popular record containing the songs of the first Skolt Sámi pop singer who sings in Skolt Sámi (Suonikylä dialect), the text on the record jacket truly manifestating pride in the Sámi lineage.²³

4. Conclusions

There is a well-known case of similar language planning activity, one that took place in the fourteenth century and was implemented by St. Stefan, the Bishop of Perm. On this C. Ferguson has commented as follows:²⁴

²² There was even an alternative orthography suggested and argued for (M. Sverloff, 1982.)

²³ Jaakko Gauriloff's record *Tanja nuorr* (Helsinki: Sauna-Musiikki Oy.) has the following text on the back of the record: Maaailman ensimmäinen saamelainen reggae-levitys [the world's first Sámi (i.e. Skolt Sámi) reggae-record].

²⁴ C. Ferguson 1967:653.

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

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

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

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

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²⁵ R Cooper 1989:41.

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