

## *Indigenous Language Preservation and Revitalization in Canada and Sweden*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the situation of minority languages in two countries, Canada and Sweden. In Sweden, we will consider the history and linguistic fortunes of the Sami people while in Canada our focus will be on the issue of Indigenous languages of Canada's native people resulting from recommendations by the federal government's 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In both countries, the issue of education is intimately connected with the health and well-being of citizens, not only the place of minority languages within primary school systems but also the post-secondary training of future teachers of these languages in schools and local communities. We will consider the following basic questions: (1) What historical factors have affected the differing treatments of minority languages in the two countries? (2) What social and political factors have influenced the changing fortunes of minority languages in the two countries? (3) What predictions can we make in today's social and political situations in Sweden and Canada as to the future health of minority languages?

### **INTRODUCTION**

This essay focuses on the situation of Indigenous languages in Canada and Sweden, where the question of their survival, education, and revitalization have interestingly similar backgrounds. A recent personal experience with learning Swedish as a language-other-than-English sparked my interest in the issue of the precarious position of minority languages in general and of one specific minority group in Sweden, the Sami. Given Canada's recent experience with the findings of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), relating to Indigenous languages in my own country, I was spurred to investigate how Canada has dealt with issues of Indigenous language preservation and revitalization as compared to Sweden. Of course, historical, cultural, and sociological factors have affected the fate of minority Indigenous languages in both countries as well.

We can begin with a few generalities in terms of the importance of language education anywhere, always acknowledging that minority language protection and preservation is an essential factor for any country that considers multiculturalism to be one of its core values. We know that Canada and the United States have long borne the contrasting epithets of "mosaic" and "melting pot" respectively; and although those terms oversimplify the on-the-ground political and cultural reality of either country, they do

provide insight into the differing positions minority language education is held in the two North American countries where English is the dominant majority language.

For Canada, multiculturalism has long been a fundamental value. In Sweden, too, where Swedish is definitely the majority language, it is also true that the country has long considered itself very open to other cultures and other languages. Swedish children begin to learn English at the age of six and Swedes rank first in the European Community among those who feel very comfortable carrying on a conversation with someone in English. Indeed, when foreign tourists visit Sweden, they often discover that Swedes are very eager to speak English, learn new expressions in English, and discuss recent American films they have seen in English. Francis M. Hult has described Sweden as a country caught between a rock and a hard place, the rock being the issue of English as related to Swedish and the hard place being the relationship between Swedish and Sweden's Indigenous languages.

It has been suggested that English and Swedish in Sweden are beginning to settle into an asymmetrical relationship. (...) The prominence of English in domains like higher education, commerce, and industry threatens Swedish to the point where there is a risk of a two-tiered society developing with English used for high-status interaction and Swedish for lower status common daily interacting (Hult 183).

Bjorn Melander has also suggested that there is the potential for social inequality arising in Sweden between those with high English proficiency and those without it. "In addition," he states, "Swedish will lose prestige if English comes to be associated more and more with high status as well as intellectual pursuits. (...) It is an important task to try to make sure that Swedish can be used in as many domains as possible, even if one does not believe that the present reduction of the use of the language may easily spread to other areas" (Melander 28).

As Gunlog Sundberg has pointed out: "One important and interesting aspect of a multicultural society is the role of language, communication, and mutual understanding" (205). Thus within the European context Sweden has adopted what Sundberg describes as a 'language model' encompassing the right to minority language stipulated in law, the designation of five official minority languages, a change of language policy in public administration, and the state offering free training in Swedish as a second language as well

as instruction in children’s native languages at school” (206).

Of course, Sweden is nonetheless generally described as having a mostly majority-centered monolingual ideology (Wingstedt 343; Sundberg 206). Yet Sundberg points out that even though several minority groups forming part of the general Swedish population (namely, the Finns, the Romany, and the Sami) had all been using their own languages for several hundred years a process of “Swedification” had still been taking place concurrently even though no deliberate language policy had been enacted by the national state. Indeed from 1850-1960, a centralized, monolingual language ideology held sway as a part of Sweden’s modern nation-state building project. Minority language groups, even those using their languages in their daily lives, were mostly ignored in favour of the promotion of Swedish. In both schools and in public life, the use of dialects was discouraged, and minority languages were generally marginalized. However, since the end of World War II, the sociolinguistic map of Sweden has altered. While English has become the *lingua franca* within the world of commerce, immigrants to Sweden have brought new languages into the country, and the European Community’s policy of multiculturalism has also had a significant effect. The most significant recent Swedish law dealing with minority languages went into effect in 2009 in accordance with Swedish language policy originally adopted in 2005. Indeed, serious attempts to address the needs of speakers of languages other than Swedish actually began in the 1960s and 1970s when “an awareness grew in certain circles that the State had a moral responsibility for the well-being of those who had chosen to come to work and stay permanently in Sweden” (Huss 13).

The 2009 law’s overall aim is two-fold: “[t]o protect the use of the Swedish language in all areas of society and to promote linguistic diversity and each person’s right to language(s)” (Sundberg 207). It is interesting to note that the one nation-one language ideology (the *de facto* position prior to official legislation) was effectively challenged by this law, but “whether this law is replaced by a multilingual ideology *in practice—and if so, what kind*—remains to be seen” (207). [*italics mine*]

Contemporary debates concerning the positive and negative influences of English over Swedish in this multicultural country are many and complicated, probably best summed up in the language policy statement as follows: “How can we strengthen the role

of Swedish without undermining the role of the minority languages and the possibilities for the individual to develop and use her mother tongue? How can we strengthen the role of Swedish while at the same time recognizing the importance of a good knowledge of English?” (Duff and Duanduan 5-6).

It is important to note here that discussions involving the dominant influence of English in Canada take a different form but are certainly equally complicated, especially for those whose first language is French or one of Canada’s Indigenous languages, for example.

In Sweden today there are some 150-200 distinct minority languages. Prior to the passage of language legislation, Sweden officially recognized five Indigenous languages under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECARML) in 1999: Finnish, Meankieli, Romany Chib, Sami, and Yiddish. Sundberg points out:

[T]he most important criteria for recognition were that the language had a long standing in Sweden and was spoken continually for more than one hundred years or at least three generations. The respective minority groups should also consider the languages to be their native languages and not merely dialects. The national minority languages currently recognized in Sweden are Finnish, Yiddish, Meankieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romany Chib and Sami; these languages must be both protected and promoted. Everyone belonging to a national minority must be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use their minority language (212).

However, the actual number of people belonging to the minority groups or numbers of speakers within each one is very difficult to find or confirm since Sweden does not collect statistics on mother tongue. It is also clear that some speakers can only understand and speak the language, whereas a much smaller number can read and/or write in that language. Only one of the minority groups, the Sami, the Indigenous people in the far northern part of the country, will be the focus of our discussion here.

The modern history of Swedish Sami policy has its origins in the first Reindeer Grazing Act of 1886 when the common law was relinquished and replaced by special legislation that granted a specific right to herd reindeer to the Sami. At that time the Sami received a monopoly on reindeer herding, which included the right to hunt, to fish, and to work the forests located on Crown land. At the same time, however, the Sami definitively lost their ownership to land, and their individual pasture rights became an exclusive

communal right for Sami villages. However, with the passage of time, even these rights were eventually denied to those Sami who had abandoned reindeer herding and chosen other occupations. Two different categories of Sami were then discernible—reindeer herders and non-reindeer herders—and from then on, each group stood in differing relation to any system of Sami rights. It is significant that Sami women are invisible in most of these discussions.

Traditionally the Swedish-speaking majority viewed the Sami as a people in need of being “civilized” and considered the most effective way of maintaining the future of the group’s population to be assimilation into Swedish society. The ideological position led to various oppressive policies, ones faced by many other Indigenous populations in the world, including the Indigenous populations of Canada, as we shall see.

During the 1600s, attempts by the Swedish government to control Sami territories and to spread Christianity led to a variety of assimilationist measures, including the building of schools designed to educate Sami-speaking priests. The establishment of these schools did result in Sami language and literature education, and at the time there was even some publication of works in Sami. By the late 1890s, however, a clearly assimilationist view of education took hold, and the objective became (as it would later in Canada as well) for students to be taught primarily in Swedish (in English in most of Canada) while the use of other languages would be merely transitional.

In less overt ways within Sweden, the constitution of a distinct Sami identity placed the Sami people within the larger discussion of what we today call multiculturalism, yet the Indigenous Sami were not viewed as political subjects or legitimate participants with a right to act, but rather as objects of inquiry and considered to have inadequate knowledge to manage their own affairs. This Swedish policy became a kind of “trusteeship doctrine,” even though Sweden has never been characterized as a colonizing country.

Everywhere in the world as colonizing states and their offspring consolidated power over Indigenous lands, many adopted trustee ownership notions for the nonconsensual exercise of authority over Indigenous peoples. Although it represented an element of humanistic thought toward them, nineteenth and early twentieth-century trusteeship doctrine was rooted in the same Western philosophy that viewed Indigenous peoples and

their cultures as inferior. Pursuant to this philosophy, which is associated with the now infamous school of ‘scientific racism,’ the objective of trusteeship was to wean native peoples from their backward ways and to ‘civilize’ them.

Hult provides perhaps the most succinct summary of Swedish language policy related to the protection of Indigenous languages:

Though historically the official treatment of minorities in Sweden tended to be less than favorable and language policies often focused singularly on promoting Swedish, these tendencies have begun to change in recent times. Today Sweden faces a delicate balancing act in strengthening the status position of Swedish relative to English while also considering the impact on minority languages of strengthening Swedish in this way (196).

Turning now to the language situation in Canada, Elena Grishaeva and Irina Dobriaeva have described its quantitative features as exoglossic, unbalanced, and multipolar (with two dominant idioms, English and French). In its qualitative feature, the Canadian version of English is defined as a language-macro intermediary while Canadian French is attributed to regional geographic areas, mainly within the province of Quebec. Immigrant and Indigenous languages of Canada belong to the category of local or “home languages” (352).

The official status of Indigenous languages in Canada remains quite uncertain. In accordance with international law and the UN Convention, however, Indigenous people have the right to use their own language; in Canada, approximately 50 primary Indigenous languages are belonging to 11 major Indigenous language groups. The three largest of them—Algonquian, Inuktitut, and Athabaskan—represent almost 94% of the Indigenous population (Grishaeva and Dobriaeva 352).

A longstanding lack of equal status with the two official languages of Canada (English and French) has naturally led over time to a significant reduction of the functional range of Canadian Indigenous languages. Along a communicative continuum of the Canadian population, these languages serve mostly as languages of everyday communication and can best be described as having only limited functionality. Within Canada, a country that prides itself as multicultural, national multilingualism expresses itself through individual bilingualism (English and French) in combination with diglossia

(a recognition of a higher status language used as a macro-intermediary, usually English) on the part of Indigenous peoples and immigrants. This is true, too, of monolinguals in certain segments of the population. For example, some of the Indigenous population of Canada certainly once had their Indigenous language as their mother tongue but today have a transitional macro-intermediary relationship with English alone. However, this monolingualism may also be an historic consequence of assimilation since it implies the refusal of some Indigenous people to use their Indigenous language. This refusal or intentional “loss” of Indigenous language is a result of the movement of many status Indians who left reservation areas and settled in cities or other rural areas of the country. Indeed about 60% live outside reservation areas, and only 12% of them can communicate in their native language, while more than 50% of those living in reservation areas can speak their native language. In most cases, the transition is to the majority official language, macro-intermediary English.

It is clear that in Canada, as in Sweden, the fate of Indigenous language depends significantly on the language policy the federal government chooses to pursue. In 2016 when Grishaeva and Dobriaeva were conducting their research, the policy of assimilation that had been carried out from the time of colonization had been largely abandoned but the incredibly damaging long-term effects of that policy had recently been testified to and discussed by the country as a whole during Canada’s work by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1983 the Canadian Parliament recognized the right of Indigenous people to use their native language, to have facilities that meet their needs, and their right to be protected by the state. However, the horror stories of Indigenous people forced to attend residential schools, where they were punished for using their Indigenous language, as well as the infamous Sixties Scoop in Canada, where thousands of native children were taken from their homes and adopted by settlers, eventually led to the recent painful process of Truth and Reconciliation, the outcomes of which are still uncertain even in 2019.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2008, there were more than 1 million self-identified Indigenous persons in Canada (just under 4% of the total population). Yet fewer than 30% of those people reported being able to speak and/or understand an Indigenous language (even though that language was often their second language conversationally).

Even smaller numbers reported it as their mother tongue, the language they first learned and/or continue to understand, or as their current home language. Unfortunately, Indigenous languages continue to lose speakers in Canada with each new census; and while new languages and significant numbers of new speakers of existing languages are being added to Canada's linguistic map, others are being removed under the pressure of either anglophone or francophone assimilation. Nonetheless, many Indigenous communities and educators are working hard to develop programs to help adults and children learn, relearn, or reconnect with their ancestral languages and knowledge. The Canadian government now also recognizes the importance of language revitalization for the health and well-being of individuals and communities, and is therefore providing support for innovative language immersion programs, language teaching, teacher education, and language documentation and digitization programs—although many current initiatives have come from the grassroots level and are based on local needs and wishes (Blair *et al.* 2-3).

We have devoted more space in this essay to the history of Sami Indigenous language policy in Sweden than to Indigenous languages in Canada, mainly for the historical fact that Canada's official status as a nation dates back to 1867 while Sweden is centuries older. However, the similarities between the two countries are striking, in terms of early assimilationist policies and typical marginalization strategies, not all of them focused merely on language.

However, if we now turn to envision an optimal model for language interaction in a multiethnic and multicultural space, we note that in many cases this multilingual model reflects the value of observable multiculturalism in both Canada and Sweden. Such a model implies that different ethnic and social groups must preserve their identity, in terms of both linguistic and cultural traditions, and that solving linguistic problems of multilingual states always must be approached by considering the status of multilingual groups *within* a multilingual environment, as well as the forms of their social interaction. Preservation, protection, and revitalization of minority Indigenous languages must also be based on adequate government funding and sufficient political will (Kirkpatrick 2007: 246). Of course, this multicultural, multilingual ideal is far from perfected in either country, but it

does have solid support in both.

The idea of successful and long-lasting innovation in the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous languages, whether in Canada or Sweden, involves the same four key aspects, as delineated by Hanna Outakoski *et al.*:

- Learning and teaching in Indigenous communities belong to long-lasting language revitalization and decolonization process. The challenges experienced in a revitalization context are different from those experienced in majority language development contexts.
- In long-lasting Indigenous projects, the focus of innovativeness is often directed toward the learning and teaching processes or the development tools, materials, and technological solutions for the promotion of such processes. Products and results of projects are more seen as phases in the acquisition of the means for language maintenance, development, and revitalization.
- Many of the Indigenous innovation solutions are designed for the community members and are, therefore, often non-profit and non-commercial. The principle of sharing underscored in other Indigenous contexts is often central and motivates the choice of non-commercial platforms and tools.
- Community engagement is a central prerequisite for successful language and culture revival efforts, and should, therefore, be considered as an important part of any Indigenous social-media supported learning initiatives. Community engagement is necessary in order to ensure culturally sensitive, relevant, and ethically acceptable resources. Successful models ought to be local, emic, and culturally embedded, based on the needs identified by the community, created for the community members (28-29).

Outakoski *et al.* go on to delineate the many positive contributions of contemporary technology that have prompted an increased engagement of a younger population in the revitalization process of their languages and cultures. Examples include YouTube, blogs, Twitter, language learning mobile apps—all of which have great appeal to young people in today's world. Indeed, there are many varieties of modern technology and popular culture that have positively contributed to efforts in both Canada and Sweden to preserve, protect, and revitalize Indigenous minority languages, even in the face of often slow-moving governmental policy or legislative solutions to the issues.

In Sweden, two areas that have greatly facilitated the growth of interest and use of

Sami are in the media areas of radio journalism and popular music. Radio broadcasts and now Internet connections have encouraged a kind of balancing act between remembering the old ways of using Sami and creating and imagining new ways of using this Indigenous language. Sami media function as a kind of language reservoir, providing a space for remembering that enables reliving and transmitting past experiences, places, and ways of speaking and knowing. In this sense, the protection and revitalization of the Sami language is both a way of seeing things and furthermore a manner to memorialize Sami history and values as well.

Music, too, can also be an important act of both the resistance to assimilation and the preservation of ethnic and linguistic autonomy that operates as a vital strategy for the survival of Sami. Pop music with lyrics in Sami is a nexus where successful links between past and present as well as global and local are made. There are many wonderful stories to share about the Sami language and culture in world music today, just as there are in Indigenous arts and media in Canada.

In Canada, there are also some optimistic signs that come directly from Indigenous communities themselves. One of the more positive aspects observable in these communities involves the idea of resilience in the face of linguistic and/or cultural oppression. One specific example of this resilience involves the Atikamekw Nehirowisiwok, an Indigenous group from Quebec, who, like the Sami, is focused on the possible loss of their language and culture. In 2006 a team of anthropologists from Quebec's Laval University began a participatory research project with the Atikamekw Nehirowisi, a collaboration whose process, activities, and research results carry the name *Atikawimekw Kinokewin*, which translates to *la mémoire vivante* in French or *living memory* in English. The objective for this collaborative research was to establish an Internet site that would serve as a kind of virtual common meeting place for the community. Findings included archival documents, oral histories of elders, photos, film clips, videos, and recordings, all of which were intended as a pedagogical tool. It is significant to note that this research protocol was undertaken as entirely collaborative work between members of the Indigenous community and the Laval research team and was always based on the three ethical aspects of Indigenous language research: reciprocity, responsibility, and

respect.

Sylvie Poirier's conclusion to attests to the optimistic tone of this moment in Canada:

Participant à la documentation et à la valorisation des savoirs et des voix Nehirowisiwok, nous osons espérer que notre projet et le site Internet contribueront à l'affirmation identitaire et culturelle des jeunes Nehirowisiwok. Nous sommes convaincus qu'en ayant un sens clair de qui ils sont et d'où ils viennent, s'ils ont la fierté d'être Nehirowisiw, les jeunes générations seront en mesure de poursuivre l'engagement politique des générations précédentes de poursuivre un projet de société ou ils peuvent se reconnaître, cela afin qu'ils n'oublient pas (82).

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Participating in documenting and valorizing the knowledge and voices of the Nehirowisiwok, we dare to hope that our research project and the Internet site will contribute to the affirmation of their identity and culture for Nehirowisiwok young people. We are sure that having a clear sense of who they are and where they come from, having pride in being Nehirowisiw, young people will be in a position to continue to carry on the political engagement of prior generations, to pursue a social project where they can recognize themselves and in this way they will never forget. [my translation]

A second positive example comes from the summer 2018 issue of *Canadian Art*. In an essay entitled "Beyond Two Solitudes," Emilie Monnet features Martin Akwiranoron Loft, an Indigenous artist from Quebec, who has this to say about his community and his Indigenous language:

In Khanawake, we have a long tradition of resistance. We were the first ones to create our own schools 40 years ago, and today, about 10 percent of the community are fluent speakers in Kanien'kéha. I was one of the first ones to graduate from the language immersion program, and today, I witness how more and more people are trying to regain their language, especially with the younger generation. Every time I am invited to speak about my work, I always share some words in the language as a way to shake people up and remind them and we are on Kanien'kehaka territory. People may not understand everything I say, but they listen. We don't have to explain everything—the metaphors and symbols embedded in our worldview seep through the cracks of our minds and into the art we make. As a Kanien'kehaka artist, exhibiting one's work in other parts of Quebec is a challenge. We don't speak French, and language is a key component in explaining our work and connecting with other artists. (. . .) There are more than 20,000 Indigenous people in Montreal, and easily half are francophone, yet we hardly have any connection to them. For sure, not speaking French is a way of resisting. (. . .) And for every minute dedicated to learning French we are not learning our own language (57).|

One final example comes from an article from the December 1, 2018 edition of the

*Edmonton Journal:*

When Liberal MP Robert –Falcon Ouellette gave a speech last year entirely in Cree, hardly any of his fellow parliamentarians in the House of Commons understood a word he said.

That's because Commons rules recognized only French and English as languages deserving of simultaneous translation.

But no more.

Members of Parliament from all parties have accepted a report that recommends interpretation services be made available on request for any MP who wishes to use of one of more than 60 Indigenous languages in the Commons or a Commons committee. (. . .)

Ouellette calls it “the most significant event for languages” in Canada since 1952, when French translation services were introduced, and says it signals to Indigenous people that their languages “are just as important as English and French. With this now, we have a fighting chance to ensure that our children will be able to speak those languages and speak those languages well and into the future” (A8).

The history of the protection, preservation, and revitalization of Indigenous languages in two different countries, Sweden and Canada, demonstrates the complexities involved in the attempts to develop policies that are both an effort to right wrongs of the past as well as to progressively promote thriving multiculturalism and multilingualism. The efforts to preserve and revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures in both Sweden and Canada are definitely works in progress, but the future does seem to be promising.

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