

Toponymies of lesser-used languages in the North: Issues of socio-linguistic conditions among Inuit and Sámi

Les toponymies des langues minoritaires du nord et le problème des conditions sociolinguistiques parmi les Inuit et les Sámi

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Résumé de l'article

Les Inuit comme les Sámi ont été affectés par l'expansion de systèmes étatiques coloniaux et de populations immigrantes, du sud vers leurs territoires dans l'Arctique canadien et le Grand Nord européen respectivement. Entre autres conditions socio-économiques, ces processus historiques ont eu pour résultat la superposition et souvent le remplacement de leurs toponymies aborigènes par des intérêts extérieurs imposant d'autres langues et noms de lieux. L'introduction discute des conditions sociolinguistiques des langues aborigènes au Canada et en Europe. Les situations y diffèrent en ce qui concerne la protection légale des langues minoritaires et aborigènes. En Europe, les droits linguistiques des minorités et des peuples indigènes sont protégés par des conventions et des lois, tant au niveau national qu'international. En fait, la situation des langues a dans l'ensemble été améliorée dans l'Union européenne. Dans la confédération canadienne, dont les langues officielles sont l'anglais et le français, il existe au niveau provincial et territorial des dispositions légales spécifiques pour les langues indigènes. Malgré cela, le niveau de protection de ces langues est très faible. L'analyse du maintien et du développement de leurs toponymies aborigènes, en tant que patrimoine culturel et linguistique, et qu'expression des relations entre humains et environnement, sert ici de cas illustrant les conditions sociolinguistiques chez les Inuit et les Sámi. Comme on l'explique ensuite, tant les Inuit que les Sámi se sont récemment appliqués à renverser le processus de remplacement linguistique, en développant des programmes favorisant le développement de leurs systèmes toponymiques intégraux. Des institutions tant inuit que sámi ont établi des programmes pour enregistrer et documenter leur toponymie orale et historique, en recourant à des technologies modernes pour produire des cartes et des répertoires. Ces programmes sont présentés et discutés dans l'optique de l'auto-détermination culturelle et des droits humains et linguistiques. En conclusion, on se demande si les communautés de langues minoritaires sont capables de maintenir, dans un contexte multiculturel et multilingue, l'espace fonctionnel nécessaire à la sécurité de leurs langues.

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Ludger Müller-Wille*

Résumé: Les toponymies des langues minoritaires du nord et le problème des conditions sociolinguistiques parmi les Inuit et les Sámi

Les Inuit comme les Sámi ont été affectés par l'expansion de systèmes étatiques coloniaux et de populations immigrantes, du sud vers leurs territoires dans l'Arctique canadien et le Grand Nord européen respectivement. Entre autres conditions socio-économiques, ces processus historiques ont eu pour résultat la superposition et souvent le remplacement de leurs toponymies aborigènes par des intérêts extérieurs imposant d'autres langues et noms de lieux. L'introduction discute des conditions sociolinguistiques des langues aborigènes au Canada et en Europe. Les situations y diffèrent en ce qui concerne la protection légale des langues minoritaires et aborigènes. En Europe, les droits linguistiques des minorités et des peuples indigènes sont protégés par des conventions et des lois, tant au niveau national qu'international. En fait, la situation des langues a dans l'ensemble été améliorée dans l'Union européenne. Dans la confédération canadienne, dont les langues officielles sont l'anglais et le français, il existe au niveau provincial et territorial des dispositions légales spécifiques pour les langues indigènes. Malgré cela, le niveau de protection de ces langues est très faible. L'analyse du maintien et du développement de leurs toponymies aborigènes, en tant que patrimoine culturel et linguistique, et qu'expression des relations entre humains et environnement, sert ici de cas illustrant les conditions sociolinguistiques chez les Inuit et les Sámi. Comme on l'explique ensuite, tant les Inuit que les Sámi se sont récemment appliqués à renverser le processus de remplacement linguistique, en développant des programmes favorisant le développement de leurs systèmes toponymiques intégraux. Des institutions tant inuit que sámi ont établi des programmes pour enregistrer et documenter leur toponymie orale et historique, en recourant à des technologies modernes pour produire des cartes et des répertoires. Ces programmes sont présentés et discutés dans l'optique de l'auto-détermination culturelle et des droits humains et linguistiques. En conclusion, on se demande si les communautés de langues minoritaires sont capables de maintenir, dans un contexte multiculturel et multilingue, l'espace fonctionnel nécessaire à la sécurité de leurs langues.

Abstract: Toponymies of lesser-used languages: Issues of socio-linguistic conditions among Inuit and Sámi

Both Inuit and Sámi have experienced the expansion of colonial state systems and immigrant populations from the south into their territories in Arctic Canada and northernmost Europe respectively. These historical processes have resulted, among other socio-economic conditions, in the superposition and often displacement of their aboriginal toponymy by external

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interests introducing other languages and place names. In the introduction this paper discusses the socio-linguistic conditions of aboriginal languages in Canada and in Europe. Both situations differ with regard to the legal protection of lesser-used, minority or aboriginal languages. In Europe the linguistic rights of minorities or aboriginal peoples are protected under conventions and by laws on the international and national level. In fact, the framework of the European Union has enhanced the position of languages in general. In the Canadian confederation, with English and French as official languages, specific legal provisions for aboriginal languages exist at the provincial and territorial levels. Still, the levels of protection are considerably weaker for these languages. As case studies the socio-linguistic conditions among the Inuit and Sámi are analyzed by focusing on the maintenance and development of their aboriginal toponymy as cultural and linguistic heritage and expression of human environmental relations. The paper explains recent practical efforts by both Inuit and Sámi to counteract the process of linguistic displacement by developing programs to enhance the development of their integral place name systems. Both Inuit and Sámi institutions have established programs to record and document their oral and historical toponymy, using modern technologies to produce maps and gazetteers. These programs are presented and discussed in the light of cultural self-determination and human and linguistic rights. In conclusion, the question is discussed if communities of lesser-used languages are able to maintain the functional space needed for the security of their languages within a multicultural and multilingual context.

Enhancing toponymies of lesser-used languages: issues of socio-linguistic conditions

Ever since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972 has the discussion around global issues heightened the awareness of educational, informational, social, cultural and environmental conditions of humankind. Major attention has been given to sustainability and biodiversity of the physical environment. At the same time, cultural and linguistic concerns have received global exposure by pointing at the vulnerable continuation and, indeed, survival of cultural diversity including linguistic expressions (Bastardas-Boada 2002). This paper aims at discussing specific aspects of the socio-linguistic viability of lesser-used, minority or regional languages (Fishman 2002) by focusing on the position and role of their toponymies in the struggle for the survival of such languages (Müller-Wille 2000). In the year 2004, UNESCO is expected to publish the *Report on the Languages of the World* prepared by the Linguapax Institute in Barcelona (Linguapax 2004). The report intends to highlight the global linguistic landscape with some 6,500 languages still spoken but whose numbers are rapidly declining. The question that arises here is about linguistic diversity, its value and the quest to reverse language loss through the development and applications of sensible and appropriate language policies (Ó Riagáin 2001). Aboriginal languages in the circumpolar north are today, in most cases, lesser-

used, minority or regional languages in their home regions, thus they are part and parcel of the current discussions around linguistic viability and diversity.

In Europe, the year 2001 was declared the European Year of Languages by the Council of Europe to raise the awareness of and attention to the linguistic conditions of more than 40 million people living as minorities who use languages other than the then 11 official national languages recognized by the European Union (Ó Riagáin 2001). In turn in North America, Canada, legally bilingual—English and French—at the federal level since 1969, stresses its inherent cultural diversity as well as linguistic richness with many languages, both aboriginal and immigrant that are used throughout the country.

In this context, I therefore like to relate the situation of lesser-used languages and their viability in both northern Canada and northernmost Europe. For this purpose, I have chosen the examples of the Inuit in arctic Canada and the Sámi in northernmost Europe, the latter one specifically in Finland, and the current status of their languages in relation to human rights, cultural self-determination and linguistic enhancement as lesser-used languages.

Both Inuit and Sámi, the aboriginal peoples in northernmost North America and Europe respectively, have experienced the historical expansion of European colonial interests and immigrant populations and their respective cultures and languages into their original territories (Aikio, S. 1992; Dorais 1996). These historical processes have resulted in their political and socio-economic inclusion, if not necessarily cultural and linguistic integration into modern central nation-states, which today are Denmark, Canada, the USA and the Russian Federation for the Inuit (Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland, under Home Rule since 1979, forms an exception with its locally shaped policies) and Norway, Sweden, Finland and again the Russian Federation for the Sámi. Furthermore, these historical developments have also caused, among other matters and conditions, the superimposition of dominant national official languages by law, also referred to as “link languages” (Kloss 1967) such as Danish, English, French and Russian for the Inuit and Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish and Russian for the Sámi. For the aboriginal peoples this intensive language contact has led to multilingualism and language shift and, in some areas, to the complete displacement of aboriginal languages. However, some language policies have been developed, which have resulted in legislation supportive and protective of lesser-used, aboriginal languages and the strengthening of linguistic rights in both Canada and in the Nordic countries such as Finland and Norway (Aikio-Puoskari and Skutnabb-Kangas in press; Dorais 1996).

Next to the general situation and status of lesser-used aboriginal languages, I will focus on the issue of aboriginal toponymies or place name systems within these national, multicultural and multilingual settings drawing examples from Canada and Finland. Toponymies are chosen because they represent a specialized knowledge and vocabulary expressing the intense human environmental interactions in specific geographical areas (Müller-Wille 2000). I will trace the recent efforts made by both Inuit and Sámi to counteract the loss of geographical knowledge and linguistic alienation, *i.e.* the establishment of introduced foreign non-Inuit or non-Sámi

geographic names. These efforts, albeit still limited in their scope, have enhanced the maintenance and development of their aboriginal toponymies within their own functional spatial and socio-cultural networks in the circumpolar north.

These strategies of cultural and linguistic self-determination developed by speakers of lesser-used languages have to be seen within the context of current legal and political conditions and existing language policies in central and federal nation-states. In Canada, language status and, by extension, toponymy are dealt with legally on the federal, provincial and territorial levels. In Finland, it is the central national government that plays a decisive role. For the legal status of languages in the European Union the umbrella frameworks are treaties and international conventions such as the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (Council of Europe 1992) and the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL) founded by in the European Union in 1981.

Furthermore, more specifically, I will outline some practical steps of implementations in each situation, which will show both positive and negative aspects of attaining the goal of continued language maintenance and retention for “numerically smaller languages” as part and parcel of the existing linguistic diversity and competition in a globalized world. This competition is increasing among the 6,500 languages used currently on the globe. In the early 21st century fewer than 500 languages are used in formal education and it is anticipated that up to 90% of the oral languages still spoken might disappear within the next 100 years because the average language community has fewer than 5,000 speakers (Krauss 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). UNESCO estimates that, in order to continue and function in the future, a language needs at least 100,000 active speakers (Bjelac-Babic 2000). This fairly negative projection by socio-linguists does, however, coincide with an increase in dedicated efforts to develop and maintain these lesser-used languages by their speakers who, such as the Inuit and Sámi, number only in the thousands and even few hundreds. They are therefore at odds with the powerful position of “larger,” national or global languages, which have a considerable apparatus and established power basis at their disposal to safeguard their future (Cornillie 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

The Inuit: language and toponymy in Arctic Canada

The Inuit (Yuit, Inupiat) live in far eastern Russian Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland and number between 120,000 and 150,000 people (Dorais 1996: 25-26). In Canada, they reside in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut Territory, along the coast of Nunavik (Québec) and of Labrador (Newfoundland-Labrador). By the mid-1990s, an increasing number of Inuit (17% of all Canadian Inuit) lived permanently and temporarily in southern urban centers such as in Toronto (in 1991; 1,895), Edmonton (840), Montreal (775) as well as in Ottawa, Winnipeg and Halifax with figures between 300 and 700 (Kishigami 1999).

In 2001, the census indicated that there were 45,070 Inuit living in Canada, *i.e.* people who defined themselves as such (Dorais 2003: 4). According to Dorais,

speakers of Inuit languages as a first learned language accounted for 29,010 (64,4%) individuals of Inuit ancestry who retained these languages. There are some variations in language retention regionally. The 1991 figures were for the (old) Northwest Territories (NWT): 16,520 (82%); Nunavik: 6,535 (96%); and Labrador: 485 (34%). Clearly, by the 1990s, Inuit languages had become lesser-used languages in the overall linguistic context (Dorais 1996: 218ff.; Dorais and Sammons 2002).

For the Inuit in the circumpolar North, language contact has existed with other southern neighbouring aboriginal languages for time immemorial such as with the Algonquian (Cree) languages in the east, the Athapaskan (Dene) and other Siberian languages in the west. With Indo-European languages, contact has occurred in various areas over the past few hundred years and has been particularly intense since the 20th century and, by the 21st century, has resulted in progressive bilingualism and/or language shift (Dorais 1996: 218; Nowak 2001) meaning that almost all Inuit, with exceptions, know and use one of the introduced colonial or link languages such as Danish, English, French or Russian depending on the region. Still, Canadian in the census of 2001, 15,165 people (8,1%) who spoke an aboriginal language indicated that they did not know either English or French (Dorais 2003). Written recordings of Inuit languages were first made by Moravian (Herrnhuter) missionaries in Roman orthography during the 18th century and, in the late 19th century, in syllabics developed and introduced by Anglican missionaries (Dorais 1996: 181ff.; Harper 2000).

In Canada since the 1970s, the process of modern native land claims has resulted in a number of agreements negotiated between aboriginal peoples and the Canadian State over land, resources and specific rights such as to education, health services, and even, in some cases, language protection. An Aboriginal Languages Act such as the federal Canadian Official Languages Act of 1969 securing English and French as official national languages has been contemplated and proposed. Such proposals have not yet been legislated at the federal level in order to enhance the position and acceptance of aboriginal languages in Canada. Still, there are situations in some jurisdictional entities—provinces and territories—in Canada in which aboriginal languages have obtained legal status within the public domain.

For Inuit languages such as Inuktitut (term used according to Dorais 1996: 47) in the Eastern Canadian Arctic and Inuinnaqtun in the Western Arctic, their legal recognition and status were tied to the expanding dominance of English and then to the introduction of French as an additional official languages in federal territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut). The following cases serve only as examples of Inuit languages, which have received legal and administrative status (Dorais 1996: 236ff.). The status of Inuit languages varies considerably throughout the Inuit circumpolar north with Kalaallit Nunaat/Greenland providing the Kalaallisut language as well as its toponymy with full official status as a national language (Dorais 1996: 52).

1) For the Inuit speakers in Nunavik (Québec), under the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (law since 1977), Inuktitut was legally secured in the public

domain and in schools with the choice of either English and French as a second language (Dorais 1996: 250). However, Inuit parents can also opt for English or French as a first language in schools.

2) In 1984 in the old Northwest Territories, next to English and French as territorial languages, legal status and recognition was given to two Inuit and five Athapaskan languages as official languages (Dorais 1996: 246). This status is continued for Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun, next to English and French, in the new Nunavut Territory established in April 1999. Despite these legal steps, major issues around language policies have continued with respect to the application of the language laws such as public use, skill requirements, education and language planning (Harper 2000). This also touches upon the status of Inuit toponymy versus introduced non-Inuit place names (Peplinski 2003).

Although legal status now exists for Inuit languages, the establishment of the necessary apparatus to support a language in education, administration and public life is not fully in place—this is clearly a prerequisite to counteract language displacement and allow for linguistic survival (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Here place names can be taken as an indicator of language development because they are seen as a priority to preserve knowledge of the land and the sea as well as a tool for orientation in efficient search and rescue operations (Müller-Wille 1987, 2000).

In the Nunavut Agreement, place names are mentioned stating that the original, *i.e.* Inuit toponymy, place name system is fully recognized as the cultural heritage of the Inuit (Müller-Wille 2000). The Nunavut Ministry of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth has the mandate to preserve and enhance place names of Inuit heritage as well as other toponyms through its Office of the Territorial Toponymist. In 2004, this office has put forward a proposal for a “Geographic Names Policy” to the Government of Nunavut to deal with “the official recognition of the importance of Inuit culture and heritage of traditional names for geographic features” and consult with the Inuit Heritage Trust Incorporated (IHTI) to attain the proper Inuit place names that exist for any geographic feature (Peplinski 2003). The adoption of this proposal will enhance the integration of major toponymic projects which have already been carried out throughout Nunavut (Collignon 1996; Keith 2000; Müller-Wille and Weber Müller-Wille 1989-1991) along with the large number of community-based toponymic surveys that are currently conducted under the auspices of IHTI and other organizations in Nunavut (Luke Suluk, pers. comm. 2003).

In Nunavik (Québec), going back to 1981, the then Northern Quebec Inuit Elders Conference passed a resolution to document all Inuit place names. This process was also part of the legal officialization of aboriginal place names initiated by the provincial Commission de toponymie du Québec under Québec's Charter of the French Language enacted in 1977 (Müller-Wille 1987).

In 1981, a joint toponymic research project was negotiated between Avataq Cultural Institute on behalf of the Northern Québec Inuit Elders Conference and the author representing Indigenous Names Surveys (Department of Geography, McGill

University). This and all subsequent toponymic surveys conducted by Indigenous Names Surveys functioned under the label NUNA-TOP Inuit Place Name Surveys (Müller-Wille 2000: 150). The first NUNA-TOP project went through the following stages to document, secure and publish all known Inuit place names throughout Inuit regions by conducting surveys in communities and integrating existing historical collections.

1) The conduct of toponymic surveys in all Inuit communities throughout Nunavik carried out in cooperation with trained Inuit researchers in local communities and their experts; these surveys were done in 1982 and in 1984 with reviews and re-evaluations in some communities in the first half of the 1990s.

2) The establishment of Inuit toponymy as the aboriginal and original place name system throughout the territory of Inuit land-use and occupancy in the northern regions of the Québec-Labrador Peninsula named officially Nunavik in 1988 based on a referendum in late 1986 (Müller-Wille 1987: 39); this latter action was in fact a geographical construct of regional identity.

3) The publication of the Gazetteer of Inuit Place Names in Nunavik (Müller-Wille 1987) parallel to the public, government gazetteer in Québec which includes place names of all provenances (Commission 1987); this gazetteer includes all collected Inuit place names, some 8,000, alphabetically (in Roman orthography and syllabics) and sorted by community regions and topographical sheets.

4) The publication of the Inuit Place Names Map Series (1:50,000 and 1:100,000) based on the National Topographic Map Series, however, with Inuit place names and their geographical extant superimposed in color; each map includes explanatory texts and the listing of all place names in an index which is linked to the gazetteer to be used in tandem (Müller-Wille 1991-1995); between 1991 and 1995, 26 maps were published and distributed to all households in the region covered; since 1995, Avataq Cultural Institute has continued the map series under the same title.

Through these steps, the Inuit of Nunavik in Québec have succeeded to document and provide a visible space for their own aboriginal toponymy separately from the official Québec toponymy which is guided by the principle established in the French Language Charter to represent the French cultural character of the territory of the province. However, due to the linguistic policy developed by the Commission de toponymie du Québec there has been an increase in the “officialization” of toponyms in the aboriginal languages spoken in Québec. Thus, about one quarter of the Inuit place names collected had been legally officialized by the Province of Québec by the 1990s. These names appear as “approved” in the governmental gazetteer and publications as well as on all official provincial and federal maps.

These undertakings by the Inuit communities and authorities have strengthened the iteration and continuation of indigenous geographical knowledge. This knowledge is part of what is called *inuit qaujimanituqangit*—“the ancient things that Inuit know” representing the way of life and thinking in the Arctic which has become a fixture in

public policies in Nunavut (Suluk 2003). Publications and, in particular, maps with Inuit place names are powerful tools to communicate and teach these names to the younger generation which is not anymore safeguarded through oral transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. Toponymic work under cultural and linguistic development has to be seen as a continuum of the process towards self-determination requiring strong commitment internally and externally. Related policies and linguistic strategies are still very much debated among concerned individuals and responsible institutions who ponder how retention rates can be maintained or even be expanded to counteract linguistic pressures by the majority (Müller-Wille 2000). However, it needs to be realized that, in the first instance, retention of language rests with the community itself although unfavorable socio-economic and political conditions do prevent and have prevented speakers of lesser-used languages from maintaining their languages.

The Sámi: language and toponymy in Sápmi on the Finnish side

The Sámi, between 100,000 and up to 125,000 people depending on definitions and sources, live today as the aboriginal people and as minorities in Sápmi in the northernmost parts of Norway (over 30,000), Sweden (over 15,000), Finland (8,000) and Russia (around 2,000 in the Kola Peninsula) (Aikio-Puoskari and Pentikäinen 2001: 5; Aikio-Puoskari and Skutnabb-Kangas in press). Since 1988 in Norway and 1995 (revised in 1999) in Finland, the Sámi are legally recognized as the aboriginal people in these countries' constitutions (not yet in Sweden and Russia) and also by the European Union through the membership of Finland and Sweden at the beginning of 1995 (Aikio-Puoskari 2001). These constitutional laws cover the Sámi's fundamental aboriginal (human) rights and also they guarantee to develop their culture and language (Aikio-Puoskari and Pentikäinen 2001: 33-34).

Sámi speakers represent 10 different languages, which are part of the Finno-Ugric language family that includes also Finnish, Estonian and Hungarian (Sammallahti 1998; Lehtola 2002: 11). Six of these languages (South Sámi, Lule Sámi, North Sámi, Inari Sámi, Skolt Sámi and Kildin Sámi) have today standardized orthographies. North Sámi is the largest language in speakers and is spoken on the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish side in Sápmi; approximately 70-90% of the Sámi speakers in Finland speak this language (Aikio-Puoskari and Pentikäinen 2001: 8). Language contact with neighbouring languages—Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish and Russian—has been intense over a long time and has influenced Sámi languages in many ways; however, Sámi has had its linguistic impact on these languages as well (Aikio, A. 2002).

In 1999, according to Aikio-Puoskari and Skutnabb-Kangas (in press), of the 7,502 people registered as Sámi in Finland, 4,083 (54%) lived in the Sámi Home Region, Sápmi, in the four northernmost municipalities and 3,419 (46%) outside the region mainly in major urban centers such as Helsinki, Oulu and Rovaniemi as well as in other countries. By 2003, the latter figure had increased to over 50% of people registered (Sámediggi 2003). In 1999 as well, there were three Sámi languages used and spoken among Sámi in Finland—Northern Sámi with 1,739 speakers (23.3%), Skolt Sámi with

386 (5.1%) and Inari Sámi with 299 (4.0%); 3,815 (50.8%) gave Finnish as their language and for 1,263 individuals (16.8%) information was not available (Aikio-Puoskari and Skutnabb-Kangas in press). Due to strong assimilation policies by the Finnish authorities till the early 1970s, the retention rate for Sámi languages has continuously decreased and has reached a linguistic crisis by the beginning of the 21st century. This situation clearly indicates rapid language displacement by both internal and external processes and forces. Thus, in Finland more than half of the Sámi declare Finnish as their first learned language; the ones who indicated a Sámi language as their first learned language also almost all know and use Finnish as a second language (Aikio-Puoskari 2001).

Politically, Sámi have fought for their rights as an aboriginal people and minority within the Nordic countries since the late 19th and early 20th century. Since the mid-1950s the Nordic states have gradually accommodated Sámi demands and needs by recognizing organizations and finally establishing Sámi Parliaments in Finland (in 1973, reconstituted in 1996), Norway (in 1989) and Sweden (in 1993). In the early 1990s, in both Finland and Norway, laws and regulations were passed to deal with the legal status of Sámi languages. In Finland, this law and its regulations were enacted in September 1991 and have been applied since January 1992 (Act 516/1991 and Regulations 1201/1991; see Finland 1991, 2001a). The law stipulates the right and scope of the use of Sámi languages with and by state and municipal authorities in the Sámi Home Region and in some circumstance on the national level. However, Sámi languages were only given status as official regional languages on the municipal level which is inferior in status. In contrast, protection was given to the national (and now European Union) languages, Finnish and Swedish, the latter one used by around 5% of Finland's population (Aikio-Puoskari and Pentikäinen 2001). The Sámi Language Act of 1991 was revised in 2003 (Act 1086/2003) strengthening the position and application of the Sámi languages through precise regulations which came into effect in January 2004 (Finland 2003a).

The Republic of Finland, already a bi-national and bi-lingual state (Finnish and Swedish), has had both positive and negative experiences with linguistic diversity publicly and legally. Finland, independent since late 1917, passed its first language law in 1922 to strengthen and protect its two declared national languages as “mother tongues.” This law has gone through several revisions over time, was completely rewritten in 2003, and became law in January 2004 (423/2003; Finland 2003b). This new Language Act is separate from the Sámi Language Act although the Sámi language is mentioned, along with Romani and sign language, to exist as part of Finland's linguistic diversity. Multilingual place names as well as their application and representation are referred to in the context of public signs and public transport where they are dealt with by executive governmental order in consultation with the Finnish Research Centre for Domestic Languages (Finnish acronym: KOTUS). Whereas linguistic rights seem to have found a satisfactory resolution, the focal point in the political realm is very much the unresolved Sámi ownership rights to land; these discussions have influenced and shaped the relations between the Sámi and the Finnish state during the last few years (Finland 2001b).

Until the 1970s, Sámi toponymic representation in their home regions in northernmost Europe occurred through local oral tradition and in writing solely through academic and scientific channels in the fields of ethnology and linguistics, which stressed the documentation of multicultural and multilingual diversity. Through extensive place name surveys, also for a long time a study requirement for students of Finnish language and literature, Finland has accumulated a vast toponymic archive, now housed in the place name section of the public Research Center for Domestic Languages in Helsinki (Närhi 1990). In 2004, this archive contains records of almost 11,000 place names for the three Sámi languages used in Sápmi in northern Finland (KOTUS 2004) which exist parallel with Finnish place names used in the same region (for parallels on the Sámi toponymy in other regions see Mathisen 1991; Rautio Helander 1994, 2004).

Official topographical maps produced by the Finnish Lands and Surveys Office for the Sámi regions did from the beginning also include Sámi place names, however, not in a systematic way representing the complete Sámi place name system known and used by the Sámi locally. Matters changed when Finland along with other Nordic countries formulated and supported resolutions on the inclusion of indigenous place names in the national toponymy at the meeting of the United Nations Working Group on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1989 (Kerfoot 1989: 6). This international context and the Sámi language law and regulations of 1992 resulted in the practice by the Finnish Highway Department to include Sámi place names on public road signs in the Sámi Home Region with the Finnish name usually first and the Sámi second with very few exceptions in areas with a Sámi majority such as Ohcejohka/Utsjoki (Aikio, S. 2001).

Furthermore, the Research Center for Domestic Languages with its Section for Sámi Languages has been charged to review all archived Sámi place names, weed out linguistic and geographical mistakes and, if needed, engage in surveys to update all toponymic information for the inclusion on bilingual Finnish-Sámi maps of the national topographical map series, 1:50,000 and any other scales produced by the Finnish Lands and Surveys Office (Aikio, S. 2001). These coloured maps display both languages, Finnish and Sámi, at the same level and with the same exposure using as an identifier a reindeer head as a recognizable symbol related to the local environment, people and their culture. In overlapping areas where more than one Sámi languages are spoken next to Finnish, place names occur in three or even more languages, however, this occurrence is rather seldom.

On these official maps, Sámi place names have now become part of the public space such as, where applicable, Swedish place names in areas designated as Swedish speaking in Finland. Still, when there is a Finnish place name, in most cases a translation of, or derivative from, the original Sámi designation, it is put first followed by the Sámi place name. Thus supremacy is still afforded to Finnish as the national and majority language, although in some areas Sámi is spoken by the majority as the regional language.

The case of the Sámi language and its place name system shows that cultural and linguistic diversity under circumstances of minority-majority relations have converged through official references such as maps to represent this diversity in a joint fashion. These are welcome steps of progress towards achieving a balance for the need of the minority and majority to overcome discrimination, involuntary assimilation and displacement of culture and language.

Can lesser-used languages and their toponymies survive?

In conclusion, one question needs to be asked: what can these two examples from the circumpolar north tell us about the chances of survival for lesser-used languages and their toponymies? There seem to be three areas that are of importance to answer such question.

1) In today's world, lesser-used languages have to defend their position constantly to avoid displacement or, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) calls it, "linguicide." It is apparent that lesser-used languages face constant crises in their applicability to maintain the integrity of the linguistic community whatever the numbers of speakers are.

2) The level of linguistic security varies from region to region. For example, in Canada, the position of aboriginal languages is rather weak socio-linguistically and legally. The political will to establish an "Official Aboriginal Languages Act" is not really in sight. In Canada, active speakers and users of aboriginal languages from different language families, numbered 187,670 or 19,8% of the total aboriginal populations or just 0,5% of the population of Canada in 2001 (Dorais 2003). In Europe, efforts point in the direction of a political will to support lesser-used languages through conventions, facilities and funds. For the citizen of the European Union the aim is to become trilingual, speaking and using one's own native language which could be a national language, an additional (regional, neighbouring) language and a link language such as English, French or German (Ó Riagáin 2001).

3) The examples indicate a strongly emerging process of regionalization and a strengthening of regional identity in both Canada and Europe; in this process language plays an important role. Still, there is a sense of a linguistic crisis in relation to the viability and ultimate disappearance of languages. Clearly, linguistic survival is dependent upon speakers and the generational transfer of languages as well as upon the economics of language maintenance, as bilingual or multilingual states as well as the European Union know very well.

There are basic philosophical principles at stake that point to common heritage and greater unity among different peoples. Within this context, language is a major element of human expression and, thus, linguistic protection is warranted to support and maintain the attainment of balanced equality among languages be they used by few or many.

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