

# Municipalities and the Sami languages: Experiences of language policy and planning in the Sami homeland region (Finland) in the 2020s

**Abstract** This article analyzes the current state of language policy and planning as it is experienced by the actors in the multilingual municipalities in the Sami homeland region in Finland. The analysis is based on a theoretical-methodological model, known as the “onion metaphor”, that was originally described by Thomas Ricento and Nancy H. Hornberger. In the analysis, in addition to the local speech community, five administrative and implementation levels spanning from the local level to the international level are recognized. The agents operating on those levels and the interaction between them are also described. The aim of this qualitative analysis is to understand how national language policy and language attitudes affect the speech community via municipalities and how the negative impact could be reduced and the positive impacts increased. The research has been conducted by analyzing data collected via an online survey, interviews, and by examining language-policy documents. The results show that municipality actors are aware of the existing problems and are motivated to solve them, but they feel unable without help from the national level. Many problems are connected to the contradiction between the regulations set by national legislation and the insufficient funding provided to fulfill them. The current legislation is also clearly outdated and needs to be renewed.

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## 1. Introduction

The Sami are indigenous peoples of the Nordic countries and Russia. In Finland there are three Sami peoples and languages: the Aanaar (Inari) Sami, the Skolt Sami, and the North Sami. All these languages are endangered: North Sami has been defined by Unesco as endangered or at risk, Aanaar Sami as definitely endangered, and Skolt Sami as a critically endangered language (Unesco WAL). The indigenous status of the Sami peoples and their right to use, maintain, and develop their languages are protected by the Finnish constitution and several national laws, as well as international conventions. However, it is often noted that these laws are not followed by the authorities (see e.g. Arola 2021). It is important to understand what the reasons are that complicate the implementation of the official written policies and how the possible obstacles could be overcome.

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze municipalities' work with the implementation of language policies concerning the Sami languages in the Sami homeland region in Finland (see Map 1). A more specific aim is to recognize and describe *who the active agents are that interpret and apply the given language policies at the municipality level and with whom they interact*. This helps to understand the language ideologies behind the choices that are made in everyday life in the municipalities in the Sami homeland region.

The Sami homeland region in Finland includes the municipalities of Eanodat (Fi. Enontekiö, Swe. Enontekis), Ohcejohka (Fi. Utsjoki), Aanaar (the name in Aanaar Sami, while in Skolt Sami it is known as Aanaar and in North Sami as Anár, Fi. Inari, Swe. Enare), and the northernmost part of Soađegilli (Fi. Sodankylä). However, most people living in the Sami homeland region do not identify as Sami or as speakers of Sami language(s), see Table 1. This means, purely statistically, that decisions concerning speakers of Sami languages are made also by persons who do not speak Sami language(s). This is important to acknowledge when studying the implementation of language policy: it is not enough to study the attitudes of the Sami or Sami-speakers alone, but rather one should aim to recognize the whole context. It is also worth noting that persons who do not speak Sami might have a different understanding of the situation as they might, for instance,

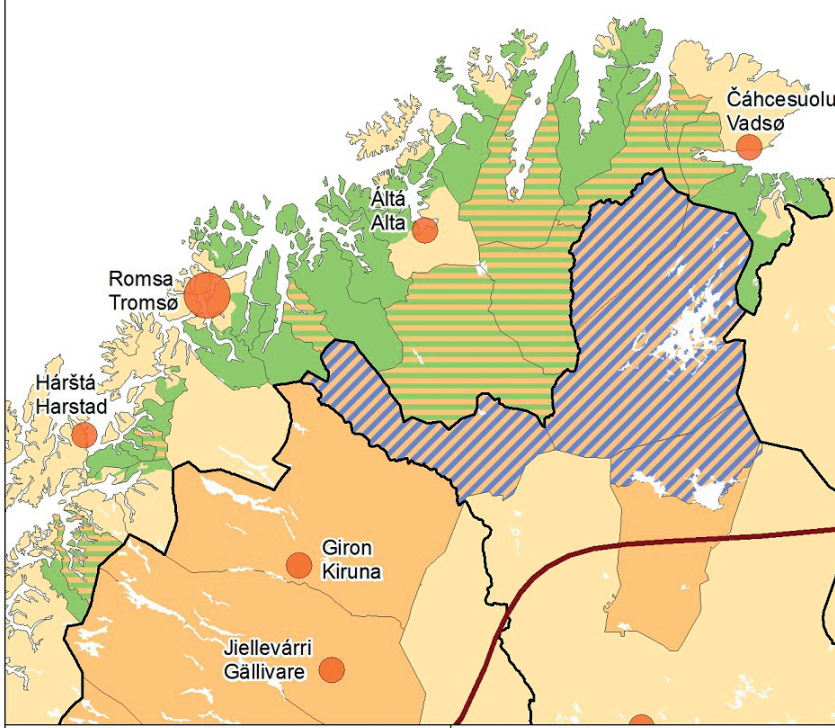
not have experienced the spontaneous reactions that using a Sami language publicly might bring out. As emphasized by Bernard Spolsky (2004: 8, 11–13, 15), it is important to take in account the whole sociolinguistic context of the studied speech communities, because this might have a significant impact on the implementation of the language policy.

	Sami-speaking residents in 2019 (Arola 2021: 11)	All residents in 2019 (Kuntaliitto 2023)	Sami-speaking residents in %
Aanaar/Aanar/Anár/Inari/Enare	468	6,930	6.8%
Eanodat/Enontekiö/Enontekis	195	1,852	10.5%
Ohcejohka/Utsjoki	523	1,232	42.5%
Soađegilli/Sodankylä	132	8,444	1.6%
Other places in Finland or abroad	686		

Table 1. The number of Sami-speaking residents in the municipalities of the Sami homeland region. For many different reasons (related to e.g. bureaucratic structures, the status of the languages and cultures, and history) these figures are probably lower than the actual number of speakers (for details see e.g. Arola 2021: 11–13).

In Finland municipalities have very extensive responsibilities to organize services for their residents. This includes e.g. organizing daycare for children and primary, lower, and upper secondary education, as well as organizing cultural, youth, library, and sports services, which have a significant impact on the daily use of the Sami languages. Before the national reorganization of social and health services that came into force on 1 January 2023, the municipalities had the main responsibility in this sector as well. (See e.g. Kuntalaki 410/2015.) This means that municipalities and their language policy are part of the everyday life of each Sami-speaking individual in the Sami homeland region. Municipalities also have the power to create or prevent the existence of many daily Sami language domains.

This article is part of a wider project that studies municipalities' language policies concerning minority languages in Sweden and Finland. The purpose of this project is to illuminate and compare Finnish and Swedish municipalities' minority-language policies and their work with the implementation of such policies in relation to the notions of linguistic revitalization and language ideologies. The project



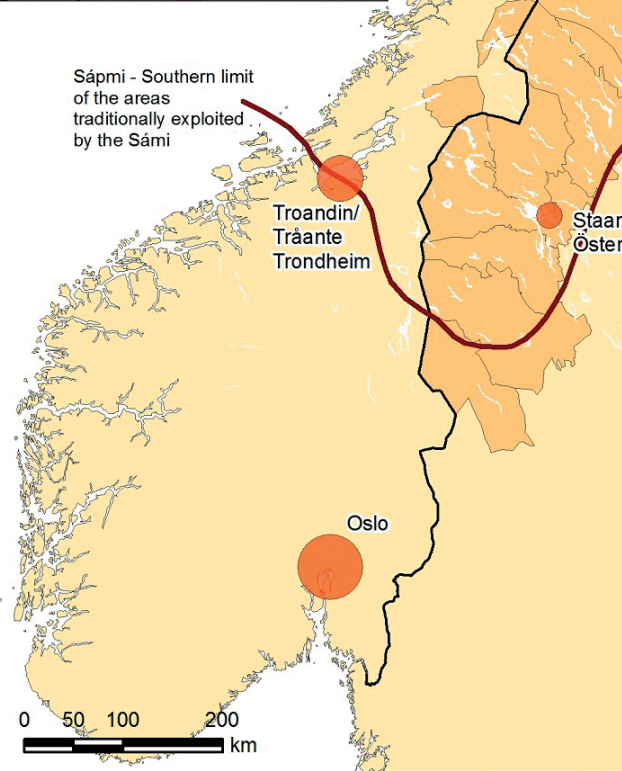
©Nordregio & NLS Finland for administrative boundaries

## Sámi areas defined by national law

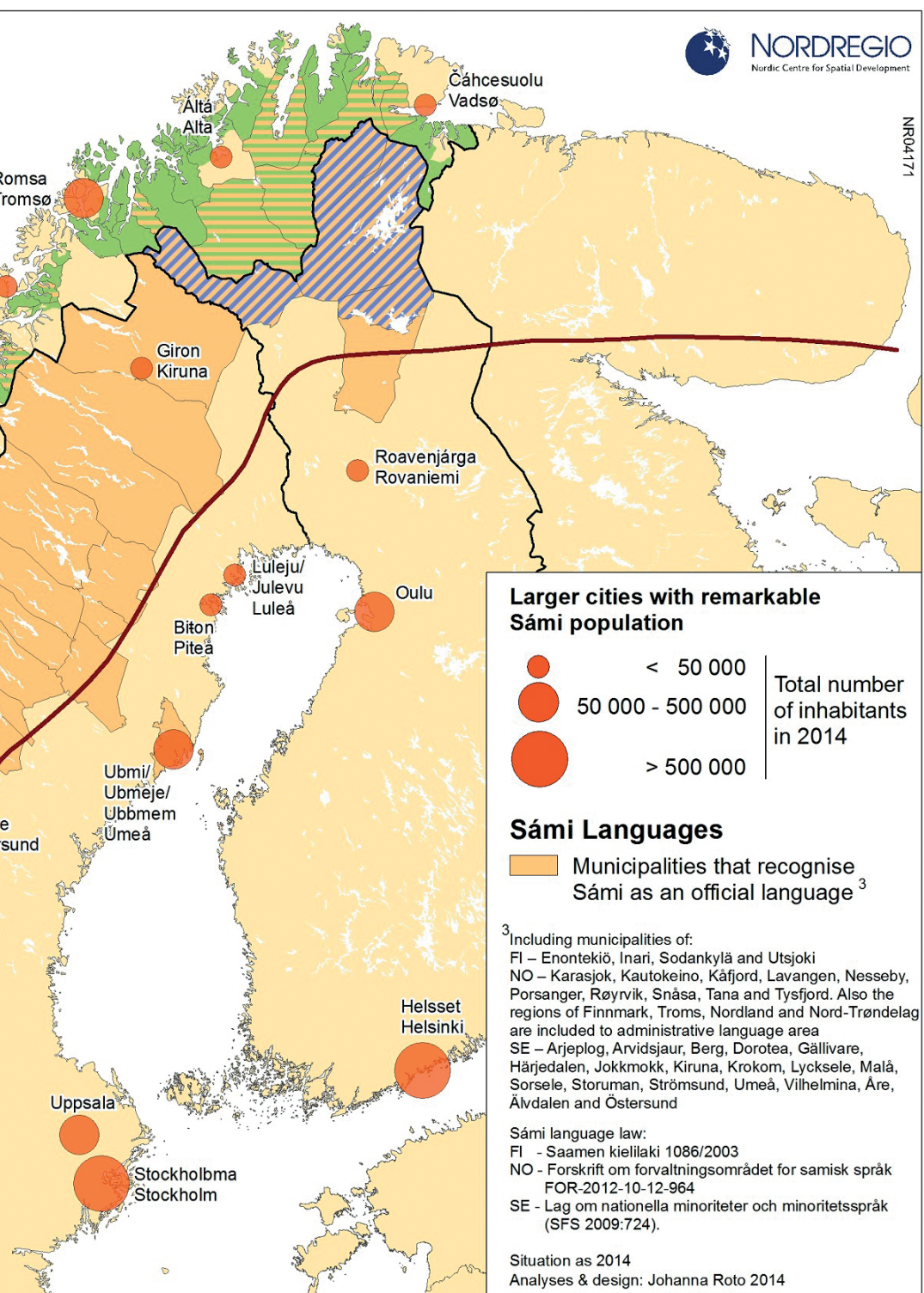
- Sámi Homeland<sup>1</sup>
- STN area<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Sámi Homeland is located in the northernmost part of Finland, and includes the municipalities of Enontekiö, Inari and Utsjoki and the Lappi reindeer herding unit in Sodankylä municipality. The area is defined in, and protected by, the Finnish constitution (17 § and 121 §) to be autonomous on issues relating to the Sámi culture and language

<sup>2</sup> The application area of the Sámi Parliament subsidy schemes for business development (STN) is based on the central Sámi settlement areas. As of 2013, the STN-area was comprised of 21 entire municipalities and 10 municipal sub-areas. Entire municipalities of Balsfjord, Gamvik, Gratangen, Karasjok, Karlsøy, Kautokeino, Kvalsund, Kvænangen, Kåfjord, Lavangen, Loppa, Lyngen, Nesseby, Nordreisa, Porsanger, Salangen, Skjervøy, Skånland, Storfjord, Tana and Tysfjord. Part of municipalities of Alta, Evenes, Hamarøy, Lebesby, Måsøy, Narvik, Nordkapp, Sørreisa, Sør-Varanger and Tromsø.



Map 1. The Sámi areas defined by national law and the larger cities with significant Sámi populations in the (Johanna Roto and Nordregio 2015.)



Nordic countries. The Sámi homeland region in Finland is marked with diagonal lines. (Map by

has been implemented at and funded by Umeå University. The other participants of the project are Professor Daniel Andersson and Professor Lars-Erik Edlund.

I will start this article by providing the reader with sufficient background information by describing in Section 1 the historical background and present legislation regarding the Sami languages and their status in Finland. In Section 2, I will explain the theoretical approach and methodology used. The data used and research ethics are dealt with in Section 3, while Section 4 includes results of the analysis incorporated with the discussion as is often the case in qualitative language-policy and planning studies. The results of the article are summed up in Section 5.

## 2. Historical background and present legislation

Finland's national language ideology has been strongly influenced by history. From the early medieval era to 1809 Finland was an eastern province of Sweden, and then until 1917 it was an autonomous grand duchy within the Russian Empire. Especially during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the idealized concept of a single Finnish language was used to create the idea of Finland as a uniform nation that should be recognized as an independent country (cf. Kaplan & Baldauf 1997: 7). This led to heated domestic debate about the role of the Swedish language; until 1887 Swedish was the only language used in official contexts in addition to Russian. (See e.g. Pulkkinen 1999; Kielilakikomitea 2000: 5–10; Lassila 2003: 63–80; Mantila 2005: 300–303.)

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, representatives of both language groups were unified against a common enemy when the Russian authorities adopted a strong policy of oppression of languages and cultures other than the Russian. Consequently, after Finland gained independence in 1917, it was decided in the first language law in 1922 that there would be two national languages Finnish and Swedish, which were also mentioned in the constitution. The other languages spoken in the country, such as

the Sami and Romani languages, were left unnoticed in legislation until the late twentieth century, and moreover acculturative and even assimulative practices were widely followed, even though they were not mentioned in any laws (Kielilakikomitea 2000: 7–10, 12–15, 51–52; Lehtola 2012: 290–297).

Thanks to the long tradition of bilingualism, it has been relatively easy to accommodate Sami languages within the national bureaucratic structures in the Sami homeland region, since the Sami languages gained minority language status in 1992 with the implementation of the so-called Act on the Use of the Sami Language Before the Authorities (Laki saamen kielen käyttämisestä viranomaisissa 516/1991). All bureaucratic systems are structured to take in account two languages both at the national level and at the municipality level. Finland's citizenry is also accustomed to the idea of several official languages within one country and to multilingual linguistic landscapes. Such strong anti-Sami language movements that have been seen in e.g. Norway and Sweden are difficult to understand from a Finnish perspective. (See e.g. Saari 2005: 327–339; Sandberg McGuinne 2016.)

However, even though the official status of the Sami languages is not generally questioned, this does not mean that the Sami peoples, Sami languages, and the official use of those languages have always been viewed positively in Finland, or that Sami-speakers' needs have been met with adequate services. The practical interpretation of the official language policy takes place in the local contexts in the municipalities and is tightly connected to the local language attitudes, i.e. the Sami and non-Sami residents' and civil servants' views of the importance of the Sami languages. These attitudes are more often connected to the local history that differs from the national history. For this reason, laws are implemented differently across different municipalities. Instead of a single language policy, it would be more apt to speak of many local language policies. (See also Lehtola 2012: 453–457.)

In Finland the rights of the Sami to use the Sami languages before the authorities as well as to maintain and develop their language and culture are protected by the Constitution of Finland (Suomen perustuslaki 731/1999, Sec. 17). The Finnish constitution (731/1999, Sec. 121) also states that as indigenous peoples, the Sami have linguistic and cultural self-government. However, the self-government is

limited to the Sami homeland region as it is defined in the Act on the Sami Parliament (Laki saamelaiskäräjistä 974/1995, Sec. 4).

The concrete implementation of the linguistic and cultural rights of the Sami in Finland are defined by several separate laws or statutes, some of which apply to the whole country, some only to the Sami homeland region. The most important is the Sami Language Act (Saamen kielilaki 1086/2003) that is very strongly binding in the Sami homeland region, including without exception all municipalities, congregations, and government agencies that operate in the area or with people living in the area. Financial sanctions may follow if it is flaunted. According to the Senior Officer Maria Soininen, Ministry of Justice (personal communication), this act should be interpreted in the Sami homeland region on the same level as the Language Act (Kielilaki 423/2003) that describes the status of Finland's national languages Finnish and Swedish. However, at present, the majority, approximately 68 percent, of the Sami in Finland live outside the Sami homeland region (Arola 2021: 11) and their linguistic rights are poorly protected.

In 2020, the Ministry of justice did a follow-up survey (Arola 2021), the purpose of which was to find out whether the Sami Language Act is working as it should. In this survey the Sami-speakers in Finland were asked about their experiences regarding the provision and functioning of services provided in Sami languages by the municipalities and government agencies operating in the Sami homeland region. The survey showed that there are very few services available in Sami languages, and that it is difficult to find information about them. Approximately half of the respondents did not even try to get services in the Sami language because the availability of such services is so poor (Arola 2021: 15–18).

### 3. Theoretical background and methodology

The present article belongs to the field of language policy and planning. This is a multidisciplinary field that can be studied by, for instance, applied linguists, sociolinguists, and linguistic anthropologists, as well as social scientists. According to Spolsky (2004: 5),

the language policy of a speech community, i.e. a group of people who speak the same language with each other, can be divided into three components: 1) language practices, 2) language beliefs or ideology, i.e. “the beliefs about language and language use”, and 3) “any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice” by e.g. language planning or management. Language policy can also be described as a “cultural or subcultural system of ideas” (Irvine 1989: 255) meaning that these ideas are socially situated and “constructed in discourse at micro and macro levels, and in institutional as well as everyday practices” (Blackledge & Pavlenko 2002: 122). The focus of this analysis is aimed at Spolsky’s latter two components, especially language ideology and language planning.

Language ideology has been defined by many researchers (e.g. Silverstein 1979: 193; Irvine 1989: 255; Blackledge & Pavlenko 2002: 121–122). Common to all these definitions is the idea that language is used as a means of – or at least as an alibi for – changing or maintaining power relations (cf. Bourdieu 1991; Foucault 2003: 6–46). Kaplan and Baldauf (1997: 3) have defined language planning as “a body of ideas, laws and regulations (language policy), change rules, beliefs, and practices intended to achieve a planned change (or to stop change from happening) in the language use in one or more communities”. In this study language planning is made explicit in the plans and policies that are written in laws and official documents concerning the use and status of the studied minority languages, as well as in the ways these plans and policies are interpreted and implemented on the municipality level.

In research-history publications, language policy and planning has been long regarded as a theoretically oriented field with mainly top-down research perspectives and methods. Since the 1980s this criticism has been answered by several researchers who have created methods that take into account also bottom-up perspectives, try to combine the micro and macro perspectives, and also attempt to break away from the dichotomized idea of separate creation and implementation of language policy. (For reviews of the history of the research paradigm see e.g. Ricento & Hornberger 1996: 402–408; Hornberger et al. 2018; Tollefson & Péres-Milans 2018.)

One of the most multifaceted and concrete descriptions of such methodology has been published by David Cassels Johnson (2009). The method he presents is a more detailed variant of the method presented by Nancy H. Hornberger and Johnson (2007), who called it *an ethnography of language policy*. The ethnography of language policy combines the critical discourse analysis that is used to study the language-policy texts with ethnographic data that is collected in the root-level implementation contexts. This method is applicable also in this study with a slightly different emphasis and materials.

In this study, I use discourse analysis for a critical reading of 1) the national laws and statutes concerning both national languages and the studied minority languages, and 2) documents provided by regional administrations and municipalities concerning minority-language rights and their implementation. The ethnographical data about the local interpretations and implementations of these policy texts has been collected in the studied municipalities by 1) an online survey of the key persons in the municipalities; 2) private interviews; and 3) by background research on all levels of the administration to clarify the hierarchies and practices connected to minority-language policies. Previously conducted investigations and studies will naturally be used as well. My own background as a longstanding researcher specialized in the Sami languages and cultures as well as my experiences as a speaker of Sami languages help to create an overall picture of the situation.

Johnson divides the studied material into five heuristic categories that should be taken into account in an analysis: 1) *agents*, i.e. creators, interpreters and appliers of a given policy; 2) *goals*, i.e. “the intentions of the policy as stated in the policy text”; 3) *processes*, i.e. the creation, interpretation, and application of the policy; 4) *discourses*, i.e. all explicit and implicit discourses including “language policy texts, intertextual connections to other policies, and the discursive power of a particular policy”; and 5) the social, historical, and physical *context*: the dynamic contexts in which the policy is created, interpreted, and applied (Johnson 2009: 144; see also Ricento & Hornberger 1996).

The creators and the creation processes of the language-policy texts as well as their goals are mostly well known in the municipalities’ context. For this reason, I intend to recognize and describe *who*

*the active agents are that interpret and apply the given policies at the municipality level and with whom they interact.* To analyze this, I use a method called the *onion metaphor* originally described by Thomas Ricento and Nancy H. Hornberger (1996; later also e.g. Hornberger & Johnson 2007; Johnson 2009). The onion symbolizes how language policy works in real-life situations: the official language policy (written laws and statutes) is only the outermost layer of the onion, but the actual outcome of the language policy is significantly influenced by the decisions and interpretations that are made on each administrative and implementation level, i.e. on each layer of the onion. In language policy and planning studies it is crucial to recognize and describe all the layers of the onion in order to understand the effects of a language policy in a specific context (Johnson 2009: 140–142; for a wider description of critical discourse–ethnographic approaches, see e.g. Wodak & Savski 2018).

It is also important to describe the social and historical contexts of the Sami in Finland and to understand their effect on the present-day situation. As a result, I seek to describe the explicit and implicit discourses that are connected to the minority language policies in municipalities. It is obvious that my study will only be able to describe some parts of the complicated web of discourses, but I have been able to peel and slice at least some relevant layers of the language-policy onion in the studied municipalities (cf. Johnson 2009: 154).

The ethnography of language policy can be used simply to describe the situation, but it can also be used to provide important feedback on the policy processes and thus promote language diversity in the studied communities. This has also been one of my aims.

#### 4. Data and issues of research ethics

The research data consist of laws, statutes, reports, and other official written documents (see the research-materials category under the References). In addition to the research literature, other written materials, e.g. newspaper articles and online texts, provided important additional material for the analysis that helped to understand the context and provided real-life examples, even though this material was not used as data per se.

The municipalities' perspectives were obtained with the help of an online survey that was conducted during the spring and summer of 2021 in Sweden and Finland. The survey was available in three Sami languages and in Finnish, and in Sweden also in Swedish. The online survey included fourteen questions, of which three were about respondents' background, two were rating-scale questions with a possibility to explain the given answer in an open-ended field, one was a multiple-choice question, and eight questions were open-ended questions. The last open-ended question field was open for any comments or additions that the respondent wished to fill in. The questions dealt with issues related to the role of the Sami languages in municipalities from several different perspectives.

The open-ended questions were deliberately made broad, so that we could get many perspectives and so that the respondents would bring up the issues that they themselves thought were important. The exact research questions that are dealt with in this article were not asked in the survey. The indirect questioning strategy was chosen because we did not want the respondents to answer the way they assumed we would want them to respond. Such an indirect method is common and proven in qualitative analysis. In this article, I use as my data only the answers that were given to the open-ended questions, and my analysis is purely qualitative. (See e.g. Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006.) My material consists of only the answers connected to the municipalities in the Sami homeland region in Finland.

In Finland, six persons representing three municipalities responded to the online survey. The material was divided as follows: Aanaar three, Soadegilli one, and Ohcejohka two respondents. Five of the respondents were civil servants working for the municipality, one in positions of trust. All respondents had been working with issues connected to Sami languages for at least some years, and most had a special assignment or responsibilities connected to the Sami languages. No response was received from the municipality of Eanodat even after several attempts. This can be interpreted as a result and will be discussed in detail below.

I have also personally interviewed six persons. Three of them are residents of the studied municipalities and members of a Sami speech community. The other three are civil servants or former civil servants

working with Sami-language related issues, and two of them are also living in the Sami homeland region and members of a Sami speech community. These informal interviews dealt with the themes of this research and details of the sociolinguistic context in the municipalities.

The data used is not broad, but it is sufficient to recognize and describe the active agents that interpret and apply the given policies at the municipality level and with whom they interact.

Issues connected to minority-language policy are delicate and often personal, and as the number of persons working in these municipalities and with Sami languages is very low, it would be relatively easy to recognize the interviewees from the smallest of descriptions. For this reason, I have decided not to give any details of my five interviewees or the persons who answered the survey. For the same reason, I do not use direct quotations or mention which opinions are connected to each other. I also avoid referring to individual municipalities if possible. It is my responsibility as a researcher to protect my research partners from negative peer-group pressure. The one interviewee that is not on a personal level connected with the studied themes, Sami speech communities, or the studied municipalities is Senior Officer Maria Soininen, who at the time was working at the Ministry of Justice. She helped me at the planning stage of this research to understand the complicated laws and regulations concerning municipalities and the status of the Sami languages, and she also recommended relevant sources.

The ethical guidelines provided by Umeå University and the research standards of the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC 2010) were followed during this project. I also acknowledge and take into account that I have a double role as a researcher and as a member of several Sami speech communities. In this article, the definition of who is Sami or a speaker of a Sami language is based on each person's or group's own self-identification alone.

## 5. Results and discussion: Layer, agents, and connections

In my analysis I recognized five layers of agents that are active interpreters and appliers of the language policy in the Sami homeland region. In this section I will first describe these recognized layers and agents starting from the innermost part of “the onion”, i.e. from the local speech community and moving layer after layer towards the international level. I will then describe, analyze, and discuss the connections between the municipality layer and other layers and how these connections affect the implementation and interpretation of the language policy in the municipalities. The most important source of information for this section is the online survey that is referred to simply as “the survey”. This analysis covers the municipalities of Aanaar, Ohcejohka, and Soađegilli because I was unable to get any answers to the survey from Eanodat. The case of Eanodat is dealt with in a separate section that is based on available written materials and interviews. The complicated local sociolinguistic situation and its historical background are also described.

### 5.1 Layers and agents: interpreters and appliers of language policy on all levels

0. **Local speech community** and its members.
1. **Municipality level:** in addition to the municipalities and their public servants this level also includes e.g. schools, kindergartens, healthcare (until 1 January 2023), libraries, and culture and sport activities organized by the municipality and people working there.
2. **Sami homeland region level:** the Sami Parliament’s secretariat and varying long-term and short-term cooperation networks between municipalities of the region.
3. **Provincial level (the Province of Lapland, known in Finnish as Lapin maakunta, before 2009 Lapin lääni):** Regional State Administrative Agency (Fi. Aluehallintovirasto), the Regional Council of Lapland (Fi. Lapin liitto), the Center for Economic Development, Transport, and the Environment of Lapland (Fi.

Lapin ELY-keskus) and other provincial institutions and people working there.

4. **National level:** Ministries, individual public servants, and politicians who make proposals and decisions on the official language policy including the Finnish constitution, the Sami Language Act, and other laws and statutes that guide the use of the Sami languages in official contexts.
5. **International level:** European Union, international governmental and non-governmental organizations such as the Council of Europe and United Nations that are behind e.g. international laws, conventions, and recommendations.

## 5.2 Connections: networks and interaction of language-policy interpreters and appliers in municipalities

Layers 0 and 1: Connection between speech community and municipalities

According to the survey, the connections between speech communities and municipalities are mainly based on personal contacts of individual employees. They are typically Sami speakers or otherwise have close personal connections with the speech community. All the municipalities seem to have good and organic connections with the voluntary sector, such as local Sami organizations, that help especially in the sector of public health and social well-being (children, youth, and elders) and culture. This is also partly based on employees' personal contacts, but the situation seems to be well accepted in the municipalities with a small number of inhabitants.

In my interviews with the Sami-speaking residents, most of them answered that they are unwilling to demand services in a Sami language because it would make them "awkward customers" in the eyes of the Finnish-speaking public servants. For some, the awkwardness was also connected with the fear of potential ethnic conflicts. Some also mentioned that they are not accustomed to using a Sami language in administrative contexts: the language did not seem to belong there. These answers correspond well with the results of Saamebarometri (Arola 2021).

The online survey revealed that the municipalities had identified this problem. The need to clarify where services in Sami languages can be found and the need to share information about the Sami-language skills of the employees were especially mentioned as examples. At the same time, some respondents also felt that they were not getting enough feedback from the Sami speech community on where to direct limited resources. The website of the municipality of Aanaar is a great example of how attempts have been made to correct the situation. On the front page of the municipality's Sami-language websites (the webpages are offered separately in three Sami languages), it is explained how to obtain Sami-language services and how to identify Sami-speaking employees. The information is also available as a video since many Sami have not learned to read or write in their mother tongue. The website of Ohcejohka is bilingual (North Sami and Finnish), but no information about Sami-language services is specified there. In the list of employees, the Sami-speaking personnel have been marked with a clearly recognizable symbol. Soađegilli's all-Finnish-language website does not contain any information about Sami-language services or employees.

In the survey, very little attention was given to the very wide responsibilities of municipalities as organizers of basic services. These contexts were not mentioned as representing a connection between speech communities and municipalities. It is not clear whether these connections are too obvious, separated from the municipalities' central bureaucrats, or whether "Sami language issues" are understood as a separate matter that is not connected to other activities that municipalities have. It is also possible that in the survey, we should have asked more accurate questions connected to these themes to get some answers.

Layers 1 and 2: Connection between municipalities and agents of the Sami homeland region

The geographically defined Sami homeland region was also found to be one independent layer based on the survey. The most important actor on this level was the Sami Parliament's secretariat that has several offices dedicated to specific needs. The most important of these

from municipalities' perspective are the Sami Language Office and the Educational Office. The former provides the municipalities with e.g. translations of official documents and assists in hiring translators. The latter helps municipalities e.g. by preparing Sami educational materials. Many respondents described the secretariat as a crucial partner. At the same time, it was recognized that the Sami Parliament's secretariat and municipalities compete for the qualified workers with Sami language skills. The Sami Parliament was seen to have an advantage because it can provide a somewhat better salary than the municipalities. The economic interplay between the municipalities and the Sami Parliament was seen as challenging by some respondents, as all institutions are working to fulfill the demands of the Sami Language Act.

Other well-recognized agents on the Sami homeland region's level were the other municipalities of the Sami homeland region. The region's municipalities have realized that they have common challenges, interests, and responsibilities that are more easily solved in cooperation with the other municipalities. This cooperation can also mean division of labor, which is important due to limited economic and human resources. The most important joint project lately has been the municipalities' work on a common language strategy. The aim of this was to improve the use and status of Sami languages in the municipalities. During this joint project a concrete step-by-step action plan was drawn up for each municipality based on the needs and problems recognized by the municipalities' actors and residents. The proposed actions include very concrete issues, e.g. that all employees should have an up-to-date list of available interpreters, but also very complicated abstract issues like the problems connected to using a translator or language assistance provided by the patient's family member in social and health services. The project ended officially at the end of 2020, but at least Aanaar and Ohcejohka have continued the project as the municipality's own internal project.

## Layers 1 and 3: Connection between municipalities and agents at the provincial level

In the survey none of the respondents mentioned the provincial level, its agents, or any activities connected to it. This is surprising, inasmuch as the provincial layer is well recognizable in municipalities' official structures as well as in laws and statutes that guide municipalities' work in general. The provincial layer provided most of the municipalities with, for instance, waste management, water supply, and areal planning. Common for all these services was that information about them was only available in Finnish. One respondent especially mentioned that they do not have resources to translate the information provided by outside actors (such as a provincial actor), since they must prioritize the municipality's own documents. It seems that such tangible services are not "Sami issues".

Even more surprising is that the civil servants that have been specially assigned to work with Sami issues were not mentioned either. There is, for example, a special officer at the Regional State Administrative Agency for Lapland who is assigned to follow and develop Sami education and culture in the municipalities. In the field of culture, a field that is crucially connected with many activities of the municipalities, there are two full-time positions for Sami regional artists (*Fi. läänintaiteilija*) specially tasked to support Sami cultures in the Province of Lapland but also nationwide. These positions are funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture via Arts Promotion Centre Finland.

In personal interviews it was mentioned that some agents on the provincial level were known to have negative attitudes towards the Sami in general. This was connected to a long history of unequal power relations and an unwillingness to improve the status of the Sami. Avoidance of connections with this level in issues connected to Sami languages may be related to this wider phenomenon, but it also seems obvious that there is lots of potential for new openings and synergies.

## Layers 1 and 4: Connection between municipalities and agents on the national level

The connection between municipalities and national-level agents was clearly the most important for the respondents. This is not surprising, not only because the national level provides the legislation, but also because it is the source of funding and other resources meant especially for tasks connected to Sami languages. Another, more unexpected remark made by the respondents was that the national level also regulates higher education. This is important for the municipalities, because all Sami language experts and Sami-speaking professional personnel should have a university education and the municipalities suffer from a great shortage of qualified labor, as many respondents pointed out in the survey.

Most of the answers concerning the connection between municipalities and the national level included a great deal of criticism and expressed deep frustration. In general, the respondents felt that they are not able to influence decisions made at the national level, and that the national level does not understand the local needs, contexts, and agents. The municipalities are in a frustrating situation where they want and are expected to follow the Sami Language Act but at the same time, they are not provided with sufficient resources for implementing it. Implementation of the act is also difficult due to a shortage of Sami-speaking employees, and recruitment of new staff is very difficult.

The personnel with competence in Sami languages are much sought-after workers also in other fields and in neighboring countries that can provide much better wages. In addition, the shortage of labor, especially in the education and care sectors, is a problem common to all municipalities in Finland, because they can offer only low wages yet the tasks are demanding. Some respondents also noted that in Finland, the laws do not allow municipalities to engage in positive discrimination of Sami-speaking employees. Proficiency in a Sami language cannot affect the statutory minimum number of working hours and only minor increases in wages can be made. This seems unfair since the Sami-speaking workers often have more demanding tasks, as many respondents and interviewees mentioned. They are e.g.

expected to do, in addition to their own work, also the tasks that non-Sami-speaking workers cannot do. Examples of such work given by respondents are to create or translate materials that are not available in a Sami language, to act as an ad hoc interpreter in customer-service situations, and to act as an all-around digital support person when there are problems with the Sami-language applications.

One possible solution that was presented was to offer additional education, for instance Sami language courses, to employees. This has been done, but it is difficult without additional outside funding: The employees need to get paid but cannot do their tasks during the courses, while the municipalities are already struggling with their budgets. Some respondents also reported that employees that had additional education in a Sami language were unwilling to use the language at work. This could be at least partly connected to language attitudes of the employees, or of their customers who are not ready to accept new speakers of the language or the non-native language variant that they use, or at least the new speakers think they do not (see e.g. Aikio-Puoskari 2016: 15–18).

All the respondents were of the opinion that the provided funding was not sufficient to cover the costs that resulted from the implementing of the Sami Language Act, even though all these costs should be covered from the national budget. Due to a lack of sufficient funding, for example all documents cannot be translated into Sami. The act does not contain guidelines for how to solve such situations. Several respondents reported that municipalities also use their own money to provide crucial services when national funding is insufficient. One respondent pointed out that all the municipalities in the Sami homeland region are situated in remote regions and are in constant economic crisis due to large but sparsely inhabited areas, and due to elderly residents that need lots of services. However, even in this situation, all the municipalities that answered the survey are using their own money to promote the use of the Sami languages. This shows the level of determination and value given to the Sami languages and cultures.

Much of the respondents' and interviewees' criticism was directed at the Sami Language Act of 2003. The general opinion is that the act is good and comprehensive, but at the same time almost all respondents mentioned that it is outdated and partly unclear. The Act

was created to support and maintain a strong and lively speech community as it was in the 1980s when the first version of the present legislation was implemented in 1992. However, at the present time many Sami speech communities in Finland are struggling to survive and the number of Sami-speaking children is decreasing rapidly. Neither the Sami Language Act nor any other act recognizes the situation nor provide tools, support, or funding for language revitalization and personnel needed to accomplish it. Neither is there permanent funding that would make it possible to further educate the employees, even though specially planned Sami language study modules are provided for personnel working at the municipalities. Funding is also urgently needed for digitalization.

Layers 1 and 5: Connection between municipalities and agents at the international level

From the answers, a connection between municipalities and the international level was mainly lacking. It was indirectly recognized when respondents described the value and importance of the Sami languages and the right to use one's mother tongue with phrases that were near-quotations of clauses of international conventions. It seems that the international level is perceived as distant and inapproachable, but the values of international legislation are shared.

### 5.3 The situation in Eanodat (Enontekiö)

Of the approximately 1852 residents of Eanodat, 10.5% were Sami in 2019. As mentioned above (see Table 1), this is likely to be lower than the actual figure, but it is the best information that is available. The municipality of Eanodat has repeatedly been indifferent to the statutory obligations concerning the use of the Sami languages and providing services in a Sami language. It is the only municipality that has been fined penalties due to this (e.g. Yle 2002; 2009; 2015). It also dissociated in the middle of the process from the network of Sami homeland region municipalities that planned a common Sami language strategy. At the present, the municipality does not have any public servants that would work with or have special competence on minority-language

issues, and the number of Sami-speaking civil servants is very low. Compared to other studied municipalities, Eanodat has also the least Sami-language content on its webpages and other provided materials. The website of Eanodat provides a list of Sami-speaking employees, but the information is hard to find, and it has not been updated since the beginning of 2020.

As there were no responses to the online survey from the municipality, and to understand the situation in detail, I interviewed two members of the local Sami speech community and one former civil servant that had been working with issues related to the Sami language. Through these interviews the situation was found to be even more complicated than expected based on other available materials.

Regarding the language-policy onion and its layers, the interpreting and applying agents and with whom they interact, the main difference between Eanodat and other studied municipalities is not in the structure of the onion nor in the agents. The most important difference is that the agents in different layers are mutually unwilling to interact with each other. Especially problematic is the interaction between the local speech community (Layer 0) and municipality (Layer 1). In the following, I shall try to explain the complicated history behind this phenomenon.

The connection between the local speech community and municipality is tense. The interviewed Sami-speakers mentioned that they at least sometimes experienced microaggressions when dealing with the municipality's central offices. They also, as a rule, avoided all references to their rights to use the Sami language, in order to prevent potentially openly hostile encounters. However, also in Eanodat the different organizations under the municipality's umbrella were experienced in various ways, e.g. the connections with the schools and teachers were generally felt to be good. This might be connected to the fact that there are several Sami and Sami-speaking teachers in the municipality's schools.

A negative stance was not encountered only on the municipality's end. As one of the Sami interviewees pointed out, the Sami language has nothing to do with the activities of the municipality and never has (the schools excluded). In Eanodat the Sami have participated in municipal politics only since the early 1970s, while in Ohcejohka and

Aanaar the Sami have participated in municipal politics and administration since the late nineteenth century when the municipalities were created (e.g. *Sámikultuvradoaibmagotti smiehttamuš* 1985: 170–171; Nahkiaisaja 2003: 255, 263; Lehtola 2012: 203, 426). Due to this, almost all the people working in the Eanodat municipality are Finnish and have a farmer background, and at least for the two members of the local Sami speech community that I interviewed and their inner circle, it felt like a distant and unfamiliar world. This is explained as connected to the boundary between the two local ethnic groups that has existed for centuries. This division has not been merely ethnic, these two groups have also had separate livelihoods (agriculture vs. large-scale reindeer herding), ways of life (settled vs. transhumance), social networks, education, and central regions inside the municipality. Both groups have also formed negative stereotypical images of the other (e.g. Palismaa 1996). This is a clear historical difference in comparison with the other Sami municipalities, in which until the middle of the nineteenth century almost all Finnish settlers were assimilated to the Sami cultures (e.g. Aikio 1998: 82–84).

The Finnish settler population started to move to the region during the latter half of the seventeenth century. Once the settler population became established, it started looking for spouses from other Finnish communities further south instead of from the local Sami community. The ethnically Finnish population grew faster, also due to an influx of new settlers, and the Sami had become a minority in the municipality already in the first half of the nineteenth century. As the region is mostly very infertile and the best places were already taken, the new settlers were forced to inhabit unprofitable lands, and lands that had before that been used by the Sami. Due to the insufficient income these new settlers got from agriculture, their survival was, much to their dismay, often dependent on the generosity of the wealthy reindeer herding Sami. All these contradictory dependencies and changes raised conflicts between the ethnic groups, and the negative attitudes between the groups started to multiply. The negative attitudes towards the Sami were supported by the nationalistic and racist attitudes that grew stronger throughout Finland during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century and were connected to assimilative minority politics on the part of the state. (Saamelaisasiain komitean mietintö

1952: 40–45; *Sámikultuvradoaibmagotti smiehttamuš* 1985: 18–21, 26; Teerijoki 1993: 31–33; Kortelainen 1995: 13–14, 19; Aikio 1998: 56–58, 62–64, 70–72; 2004: 68, 70–73; 2007: 149–157, 344–350, 366–367; Isaksson 2001; Hiltunen 2007: 86–109, 131–138, 200–214, 250–252 Lehtola 2012; Keskitalo et al. 2014.)

When the Sami were recognized as an indigenous people in the late twentieth century, their social status improved. This change was hard to accept for some groups with a farmer background. Especially the establishment of the Sami homeland region and Sami Parliament met locally with opposition and sometimes furious reactions, as well as a wave of artificial re-identification as Sami. (See e.g. Palismaa 1996; Tuulentie 2001; Lehtola 2015.) Soon after this the Meänkieli speakers or the Tornedalingar people in Sweden and the Kven people of Norway began to demand recognition as a distinct linguistic and cultural minority, and the farmer population in Eanodat realized that they belong to the same ethnic and linguistic group. However, in Finland Meänkieli is not officially recognized as an independent language but as a local variant of Finnish, and the local culture as a variant of Finnish culture. Another difference is that in Sweden and Norway the Tornedalingar and Kven were subjected to similar assimilating discrimination as the Sami. In Finland the local culture and language have been viewed positively, but the linguistic situation is naturally complicated because the local Finnic language is not recognized as a national minority language as in Sweden and Norway, but rather it is hierarchically subordinated to standard Finnish (Huss 1999: 69–71, 80–94).

In addition to the old grudges, the different statuses in different states' national language and culture policies have been seen as unfair by the farmer population. The Sami were also believed to have gained an unfair advantage and suspected of getting economic benefits because of their status as an ethnic and linguistic minority. (For examples and more extensive analysis see e.g. Lehtola 2015.) Since this still-ongoing process started, the situation has become more and more tense. At present, the tension has significant negative impact on the local language attitudes and the implementation of the national language policy at the local level. At the same time, my interviewees stress that there are also many Sami and Finns that have friendly and respectful relationships in everyday life.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of the layers of the language policy “onion” reveals that most of the municipalities in the Sami homeland region are devoted to working for enhancing the status of Sami languages and are willing to use their own resources to do it. However, there are several problematic points and partly subconscious discourses and practices that create obstacles for the municipalities’ positive aims. Some of these obstacles can be solved within the municipalities, but the most important obstacles are systemic. I have gathered some recommendations that could help the municipalities to see what can be done to make the connections between different levels more productive and the processes smoother.

On the ground level, municipalities should put more effort into cooperating with local speech communities as an entirety. At present there are several sections at the municipalities (e.g. administration, schools, healthcare) that are doing a good job, but operate as a separate actors and do not follow the same language policies and practices with their clients as other sections. Common practices would make the whole municipality more approachable for a Sami speaker and at the same time it would create synergies in the municipality when meager resources could be used in coordination. This practice would provide at a more limited scale the same benefits as the cooperation with other municipalities.

The municipalities’ cooperation network should also be kept alive, because it has had very positive results. It could be considered whether even some practical tasks might be shared between several municipalities. It might also be easier to get common funding or other resources if all the municipalities applied for it together. At the provincial level, the municipalities could actively contact the other actors and suggest closer cooperation and burden-sharing. Solutions to some problems might even be solved in inter-Nordic or international cooperation.

However, the most problematic layer, i.e., the connections between municipalities and the national-level agents, needs the most attention, as the situation is totally unbearable. Surprisingly, there is an obvious unwillingness among the people working with Sami

languages to start on the renewal of the Sami Language Act. According to my understanding, this relates to the renewal process of the Act on the Sami Parliament that has lasted 12 years without results: three Finnish governments have tried without success to renew the act that in its present form, violates the human rights of the Sami peoples (see e.g. Eduskunnan kirjasto 2023). This process has created lots of local conflicts and resulted in deep distrust towards the authorities.

In such a context, the seemingly incoherent opinions become understandable: it seems that for many respondents, even a bad law and the status quo is better than a new law if the drafting process includes ten years of struggle and conflict. In this climate of mistrust, a completely new language-revitalization act accompanied with sufficient funding could be enacted to solve the present problems. The initiative to create such legislation could be a joint project of the speech communities, Sami organizations, municipalities, and the Sami Parliament's secretariat that has the expertise in legislation and international law.

At present, the money from the state budget that is meant for Sami speech communities is distributed through several ministries and organizations, and it is partly granted automatically, partly must be applied for, even though in the end it is mostly used to cover the same statutory expenses that are connected to the Sami Language Act or similar legislation that has been created to support the Sami languages. From the point of view of the national language-policy system, and keeping in mind the limited resources, it is worth asking whether the money is used optimally, equally, and openly enough. When planning the new language-revitalization act this aspect should be studied as well.

The other big issue that concerns all municipalities is the lack of qualified employees. There are and have been initiatives at the universities and second-degree educational institutions that are aimed to improve the situation. Especially the Sámi Education Institute in Aanaar and the Giellagas Institute for Saami Studies at the University of Oulu have lately started to create new in-service training programs, e.g. Ketterä korkeakoulu (Agile University) and Sami language studies for the social and health sector. Students can pursue these programs while working at the same time, and the curricula are especially tailored for people who are already working at the municipalities and other

institutions that use a Sami language but are not qualified for their jobs or are lacking language skills. Such education programs have already been proven to be very effective and to support language revitalization (see e.g. Olthuis et al. 2013).

However, all these programs have been based on disparate, separately funded projects. Such in-service training programs should be permanent until there is no longer any need for them. Again, a common initiative of teaching institutions, municipalities, and the Sami Parliament's secretariat could convince the national-level agents to support such permanent activity. In addition, a fair state-funded language supplement to employees' salaries would encourage the Finnish-speaking civil servants to join such programs. In the municipalities, creating a positive and accepting atmosphere for the new language speakers and fair reorganizing of the workload for Sami-speaking civil servants would be very beneficial. This could be done as a part of normal supervisory duties in each municipality, but a short course about these themes for personnel in higher positions could be organized jointly. It would be good to increase also customers' awareness about the new speakers of Sami. The language learners could, for example, use "language-learner" badges. In addition, the offices should have wall posters explaining the situation and asking the customers to support or at least to respect employees' language-learning process.

An underlying language attitude that emerges from the analysis is that the Sami languages do not belong to all language domains. The Sami languages belong, for instance, to education, libraries, and some hobbies, but not to technical departments, waste management, and areal planning. If the Sami languages are seen as belonging only to some limited language domains, they will lose their vitality. This problem could, at least partly, be solved by additional language education and proactive cooperation with the provincial level actors, as explained above. Another underlying language attitude is that to use a Sami language is a choice, not a necessity. This attitude is present in all the layers of the "onion", from the Sami speech community where people do not ask for services in Sami to the national level where it seems impossible to find the money that is needed to fulfill the intentions of the law. This is a reminder that the power relations between the minority and national languages are still going strong.

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## Abbreviations

Fi.      Finnish  
Swe.    Swedish

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Created by Daniel Andersson, Lars-Erik Edlund, and Taarna Valtonen in Swedish, translated into Aanaar Sami, North Sami, Skolt Sami, and Finnish by Valtonen. Made with Microsoft Forms tool. Shared with respondents on 5 May 2021.

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