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## Overcoming Silence and Sorrow: Sami Language Revitalization in Sweden

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# Overcoming Silence and Sorrow: Sami Language Revitalization in Sweden

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## **Abstract**

*Our paper focuses on new ways to address silence and feelings of sadness surrounding language and cultural loss in Indigenous contexts, sometimes resulting in deep inter-generational trauma. As a consequence of two Council of Europe conventions ratified by Sweden, Indigenous and minority language maintenance and revitalization was included in the Human Rights commitments of the Swedish state in 2000. Work in these fields led in 2010 to the establishment of the Sami Language Center with the assignment to find new ways to ascertain that all the Sami languages spoken in Sweden would survive and develop as part of the Swedish national heritage. We discuss methods used at the Center to tackle large-scale community language loss, mixed feelings, and emotional blocks resulting from a history of stigmatization and forced assimilation. We provide examples of how these methods have affected local communities and individual people, leading to deeper reflection on the revitalization process and what is needed to strengthen it. We also discuss new kinds of efforts needed to deal with emotions surrounding revitalization, and conclude that revitalization should be seen as a holistic task involving body and mind. Furthermore, the consequences of the fact that language revitalization is considered by some a “women’s issue” (while there is a great need of including more men in revitalization efforts) are also discussed in this article.*

**Keywords:** Sami languages; Indigenous language revitalization; Sami rights in Sweden; Master Apprentice Program; Language Block Method; Language Circus Method

## **Introduction**

When I left the place I started to cry, to cry because there are so few mother tongue speakers left and because the language is so indescribably beautiful. And then I saw the similarity. The similarity between the torn land, how torn it is by exploitation, and also how our languages have been pressed to the corners of

it, to a handful of people. They are like little lighthouses, little lighthouses in the margins, still standing there and shining, and we can see them every now and then when we steer our ships forward. (Patricia Fjellgren, 2016<sup>1</sup>)

**T**he languages of the Indigenous Sami have been, and still are, spoken in four countries – Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.<sup>2</sup> In all these countries, Sami languages have endured a long history of stigmatization and forced assimilation policies on the part of the majority, non-Sami society. In Sweden, a period of Social Darwinist ideologies—at its strongest around the turn of the century 1900—labeled the Sami as an inferior race bound to disappear sooner or later from the face of the earth. Later, a long period of overt assimilation policies lasting until the 1970s would affect subsequent generations of Sami. Many Sami felt compelled to abandon everything connected to Sami identity in order to find their place in society. Many were hurt in the process, and the scars still remain, causing what we have observed as pain and sorrow among the Sami in Sweden.

In this article, we tackle the issue of emotions in Sami revitalization in Sweden from our two perspectives. We, the authors of this article, have been cooperating with each other for a long time; we have written joint articles, given joint talks, and done research together. Our mutual interest is promoting cultural and linguistic revitalization in society. Patricia Fjellgren is both South and North Sami, with a Master of Arts in Sami Language. She also belongs to the growing number of Sami who have

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is from “Clearcuts, languages and banana trees: A mail conversation about the heritage from the Nomad school” (Huss & Fjellgren, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> According to the Swedish Sami Parliament ([www.sametinget.se](http://www.sametinget.se)), there are approximately 80,000-100,000 Sami in the world, and 20,000-35,000 of them live in Sweden. Traditionally, three Sami languages have been recognized in Sweden: North, Lule and South Sami. A couple of years ago, another Sami variety called Ume Sami got an orthography of its own and it is now officially treated as the fourth Sami language in Sweden. The orthography of a fifth variety, Pite Sami, is being created at present (2019). It is uncertain how many people with Sami ancestry identify themselves as Sami because there are no ethnicity or language censuses in Sweden.

reclaimed their Sami languages as adults, in her case two of the Sami languages. Patricia has had a long career in freelancing in Sami language and film, and she is the initiator of the Language Circus revitalization method described in this article. Leena Huss belongs to the Finnish national minority in Sweden. She is Professor Emerita at Uppsala University and specializes in language loss and revitalization. During the past decade, Leena has been researching in South Sami revitalization. She has also been involved in the monitoring of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in Europe.

Our discussion is divided into two distinct parts. The first part, written by Leena, presents a background to the issues we are addressing. The second part, written by Patricia, is a description of results of conversations she has had with other Sami involved in language reclamation. She also describes a new form of language reclamation for children called the Language Circus. The conclusions are written by both of us, emphasizing the need to include several perspectives into our work to support endangered languages and their speakers.

### **Conflicting beliefs, thoughts and emotions in language reclamation and revitalization**

Linguist Aneta Pavlenko (2005) writes in her monograph about emotions and multilingualism:

As linguistic human beings, we get emotional about what languages we should and should not be using, when and how particular languages should be used, what values should be assigned to them, and what constitutes proper usage and linguistic purity. (Pavlenko 2005, p. 195)

In Indigenous contexts, with many people still suffering from very negative past experiences, primarily stemming from colonization, emotions are bound to play an even stronger role. We know that language revitalization is perceived by many as part of a decolonization process, something needed in ethnic revival and a way of Indigenous empowerment

and emancipation. Revalorizing a language that was previously heavily stigmatized is a way of dealing with a long history of identity stigmatization in general.

But while the solution, a revalorization of language and identity, may seem obvious at first glance, it is not easy. An article by Brandi Morin in CBC News Feb 10, 2019, titled *Emotional journey*, tells the story of 28 year old Sandra Warriors who is trying to take back the nxa'amčín language of her father and the nselxcin (Okanagan) language of her mother's family. She says, "I never imagined how much of an emotional process it is. I have moments I feel overwhelmingly happy. Other times I break down crying, doubting myself, getting angry. It still is a struggle."

In Indigenous communities, both the young and old find themselves between conflicting language ideologies represented by the majority society but also the Indigenous community where it is not always easy to reach consensus on sensitive issues pertaining to language. Kroskirty (2009) emphasizes the need to come to an ideological clarification about such issues:

Language ideological clarification is the process of identifying issues of language ideological contestation within a heritage language community, including both beliefs and feelings that are Indigenous to that community and those introduced by outsiders (such as linguists and government officials), that can negatively impact community efforts to successfully engage in language maintenance and renewal. (p. 73)

Kroskirty writes that identifying and raising awareness about linguistic issues could ideally lead to helpful discussions between community members, or between community members and outsiders, with differing opinions, so that these discussions would lead to clarification or "foster a tolerable level of disagreement that would not inhibit language renewal activities" (Kroskirty 2009, 73). We build on Kroskirty's work while also adding our own perspectives, gained from research and practice, that transform his ideas into ways that tackle issues of disagreement without inhibiting potential speakers. In our language reclamation and revitalization efforts, we therefore accept the fact that conflicting emotions

and feelings, sorrow and an inherited silence, are factors to be counted on, and to respect, and try to address in new and innovative ways if we want our efforts to be successful in the long run.

### **Language reclamation as part of universal human rights work**

Official human rights work consciously aiming at the strengthening of Sami languages and identities in Sweden started in the year 2000, when an official national minority policy entered into force. Before then, there were individuals, families, organizations, and others who worked hard to promote the use of Sami in various domains, but it was an arduous task, and the weakening of these languages continued at an alarming rate. Sweden's image as a country with high human rights standards, supporting oppressed Indigenous peoples and minoritized peoples in other parts of the world, did not in actuality include support for its own Indigenous people, the Sami, and for decades, it was more or less a non-issue.

Sweden, as did all Nordic countries, signed and ratified a number of conventions securing the human rights of all its citizens. Some of them, as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, include paragraphs on linguistic rights of minorities. Sweden has also voted for the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) that states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to revitalize their languages as well as to use, develop and transmit them to coming generations. However, most of these human rights documents merely made open language discrimination and assimilation problematic, but they were not particularly successful in terms of the practical work of language reclamation and revitalization. Historical minorities including the Indigenous Sami repeatedly voiced their concern about the continuing language shift towards the majority and dominant Swedish language.

When Sweden joined the European Unions in 1995, however, pressure on the part of the Council of Europe, various minority rights advocates, and minority organizations grew, and in the year 2000, Sweden finally ratified two Council of Europe conventions, the Charter for Regional

or Minority Languages and the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. In those conventions, linguistic and cultural rights are central, and the Swedish government adopted the idea that the languages and cultures of national minorities are part of what is considered common Swedish cultural heritage.

After relatively passive initial years, the Swedish government again received severe criticism on the part of the Council of Europe, human rights organizations, minorities, and others concerning the weak implementation of the new national minority policy, and this criticism compelled the state to do more. A minority policy reform was launched in 2010, making possible, among other things, a new and promising development in Sami language reclamation—the establishment of the Sami Language Center that same year. Here, government funding reached beyond declarations and short time projects, starting resolute, locally-based, strong and efficient work to strengthen all Sami languages in Sweden. Without the national minority and minority language policy as well as the Council of Europe minority conventions, this development would not have been possible, but neither would the Center have succeeded without the work of the dedicated, locally-anchored Sami staff and the communities involved.

### **The Sami Language Center**

When the Sami Language Center (SLC) was established as a result of a minority policy reform in Sweden (Government Bill 2008/09:158), it addressed strong criticism on the part of the Council of Europe to the effect that the most endangered Sami language in Sweden - South Sami - risked extinction:

South Sami is in a very precarious situation and needs resolute support and innovative solutions (---) where appropriate, in collaboration with the authorities in Norway, if it is to survive as a living language in Sweden. (CoE Charter Report on Sweden 2006, 58)

By then, many minor revitalization projects had been initiated by Swedish authorities, as well as by the Sami themselves, often without



leading to more than temporary results. The establishment of the SLC was the first effort to create a permanent space for continuing revitalization work, with staff whose main task was to enable people to regain and use their Sami languages. This was to be done by developing, applying, and spreading efficient language revitalization methods, and by adopting successful methods used in other parts of the world, an important part of many revitalization efforts (Leena Huss 2017, 15-16).

The SLC was a government initiative, with state funding, but the responsibility of the implementation was given to the Swedish Sami Parliament. The staff members were recruited among speakers of different Sami languages, with different professional backgrounds. Patricia, who was among the first staff members recruited, has emphasized the importance of the SLC as a safe space for discussion:

The first thing that comes to my mind is that the mere establishment of the Sami Language Center has created a space to gather people together, around what language is, what language loss is, and *that makes people less lonely*. Because one of our problems with the language situation we have been living in is that people have had to carry their sorrow and their language loss alone. That is something that we have absolutely not talked about. In that way I think the Language Center has been an invaluable hub, a meeting place with status and power. (Huss, 2017, p. 54, our emphasis)

The overarching aim of the SLC was to "strengthen people's possibilities to use and to reclaim the Sami language" and to "promote and stimulate the use of Sami in society" (Huss, 2017, p. 6). Patricia mentions this broad mission – language revitalization – as an asset as it allowed for the freedom the staff needed to choose how to proceed and determine the most important problems to tackle. Nobody dictated in detail how the work was to be done, and the staff were given free hands so to speak, which of course also demanded a lot of them.

The staff began their work by trying to chart the linguistic needs of a heterogenous population, including different Sami languages, different

cultural traditions and livelihoods, different ages, and living in various parts of the vast Sami territory of Sweden (see Image 1).



Image 1. Sápmi, the Land of the Sami. Map drawn by Anders Suneson.

Source: [www.samer.se](http://www.samer.se)<sup>3</sup>

The Sami Language center had two offices, one situated in Staare/Östersund and the other in Dearnar/Tärnaby, both in the traditional South Sami area in Sweden. The staff had to develop activities carefully tailored to promote revitalization in an innovative and comprehensive way. They were to work in close contact with the local Sami communities and create something that had never existed before in Sweden. At the same time, the staff studied international research on revitalization and started designing their first projects.

The staff made an inventory of well-known problems in Sami language reclamation and tried to address the most serious ones, initially

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<sup>3</sup> Permission granted to the authors for usage and printing of the map from the maker of the map.

concentrating on two. The first was the scarcity of mother tongue speakers who could pass on their language to others, a critical problem among the very endangered South and Lule Sami communities. Another problem was the psychological block, or barrier, preventing potential speakers from using the Sami language.

*Two revitalization projects applied and developed at the SLC*

Among the first methods applied by the SLC was *Bihkedäija*, a mentor program similar to the Master-Apprentice program created in California (Hinton, 2013), and *Language Block*, based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and designed to help people overcome psychological blocks in language use (Juuso, 2013). In the process of planning the Master-Apprentice program *Bihkedäija*, several international contacts were made. Patricia, the project leader, contacted Annika Pasanen, who had been part of developing the very successful Master-Apprentice Program for the Aanaar Sami language in Finland (see Olthuis et al, 2013; Pasanen, 2015). They had telephone meetings, and Patricia gained access to the documentation from the Aanaar project. She also had contact with Tracey Herbert, head of First People Language and Culture Council in Brentwood Bay, Canada. A field trip to visit FPLCC was made and there Patricia learned more closely how the FPLCC was working with their own Master-Apprentice program. Later on, professor Leanne Hinton together with Karuk speaker Nancy Steele, were invited to Sápmi to hold a workshop for the participants of the Ubmeje Sami Master-Apprentice program, dedicated to the Ume Sami language.

The pilot project of *Bihkedäija* proved very difficult to realize at the outset because of the very few remaining South Sami mother tongue speakers. Most of them were in their 70s or 80s when they were recruited as mentors to students enrolled in an elementary course of South Sami at Umeå University, in the northern part of Sweden. The mentor-student pairs were to be in close contact with each other, meet regularly, and use South Sami in everyday communication. The students could also sit and listen, without being expected to talk before they felt ready for it. The mentor-

student pairs were encouraged to do something practical together while they used Sami, for instance cook dinner together. At those times, the whole body is active and one learns the language while using all senses. South Sami cultural practices in the form of duodji, or Sami handicraft, traditional work with the reindeer, and other Sami activities were also important parts of the project. During the pilot project, five group gatherings for mentors and students were also arranged. It was voluntary for the participants to join these meetings once a week.

The *Language Block* method addressed the fact that many Sami who had acquired Sami language in their childhood or who had participated in Sami language courses had great difficulties in actually starting to use the language, in spite of seemingly positive circumstances. Some of them had negative memories from the past or present ambivalent feelings, which hindered them from starting to speak. *Language Block*<sup>4</sup> was developed by Jane Juuso, at the Unjárga/Nesseby Sami language center in northern Norway, to encourage the participants to overcome such blocks, with the help of study circles developed according to the principles of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Juuso, 2009<sup>5</sup>). The aim of these circles was to help participants overcome the psychological blocks they experienced by training them to gradually use more and more Sami in their everyday lives. In the pilot Language Block Program there were nine participants attending and ten group gatherings were arranged, mostly in the area of Staare/Östersund. The groups met approximately once a month. The group gatherings covered various kinds of group and language exercises, and the participants also had homework to do between the gatherings.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Before the program was launched by the SLC it was adapted to the situation in the South Sami area in Sweden, where the remaining speakers are scattered over large areas, and where there are also other differences from the conditions for the Sami in Unjárga. Sylvia Sparrock from the SLC was the project leader and together with Jane Juuso she planned the program. The pilot project lasted a year and ended in the fall of 2012.

<sup>5</sup> A Swedish version was published in South Sami and Swedish in 2013

<sup>6</sup> Since the year 2015, there is also an English translation of the Swedish version of Jane Juuso's book: *I am taking my language back*. Brentwood Bay, BC: First Peoples' Cultural Council.

The *Bihkedäjja* and *Language Block* methods have, since the first years, been applied in several Sami communities in Sweden, and they have resulted in a number of new speakers who have continued to use their newly gained Sami competence as teachers, journalists, and in other professional capacities. Both methods address negative beliefs and emotions inherited from the days of overt oppression and assimilation, the greatest obstacles to Sami revitalization in Sweden. It has been important to break the silence surrounding the problem of language loss and evoke a desire to use the language. Through an open letter to the South Sami community, the Sami Elders in the first mentor program reminded us of the responsibility attached to Sami language competence. They wrote,

With this letter we request other Elders to start speaking our language. We have the knowledge and we can guide the coming generations precisely like our own Elders guided us. We miss the time when our language was stronger. Now we are the Elders. We can help others. Through the Mentor Program we have got to know the young. The young are longing for Elders who take their responsibility, who don't say everything was better in the past. We, the Båarasåbpoeh, older Sami, can no longer stand beside and just watch. We who are the Mentors take our responsibility and we will no longer be silent. (From the "Appeal of the Elders in Östersund," June 14, 2012, *Sametinget*)

### **Sami voices about language reclamation: What lessons have *Bihkedäjja* and *Language Block* taught us?**

We have been able to reflect on the lessons learned through SLC programs, most recently through conversations held between Patricia and former participants in the *Bihkedäjja* and *Language Block* programs from March 2019 through April 2019. In this section, we offer the thoughts and emotions of participants, especially concerning supporting factors in language reclamation, which are presented thematically. We discuss the circumstances of the SLC programs in order to then foreground a new and innovative language revitalization method, the Language Circus, developed

by Patricia as a result of her long-time work with the endangered Sami languages.

*The need to process the sorrow of the past*

The year is 1950. I am with my mother and aunt. We are in a shop and we speak Sami. Suddenly the shop owner sharply tells us that in his shop he does not want to hear our ugly language. It has stuck to my mind. (Elder Male)

When the pilot *Bihkedäjja* program was initiated, the mentors had their own gatherings where they could discuss with each other and receive instructions about the details of the method. A striking feature of these initial stages was the apparent need among the elderly mother tongue speakers to recount and discuss their negative experiences from the past and the shame and sorrow associated with the South Sami language in Swedish society. For example, the opening quote comes from a male Sami mentor born in 1943, and after decades of silence, mentors like him had an urgent need to process their memories and mixed emotions in order to be able to move on and tackle the new task of promoting the language and transmitting it to the next generation.

After the first gathering with the mentors it was collectively decided that the project would continue to arrange mentor gatherings since the need to process past experiences was so obvious. All of the mentors had attended schooling focused on assimilation of Sami and where they were forbidden to speak South Sami<sup>7</sup>. These mentors now faced a totally new situation where they were *encouraged* to speak Sami, and their language

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<sup>7</sup> These so-called Nomad schools were actually a segregated school system targeting children in reindeer herding families. The school year was much shorter than in other schools, and the number of subjects smaller according to what the children were supposed to need when living a reindeer herder's life. The aim was to "preserve" this part of the population "unspoiled" by modern comforts, to utilize the mountains where agriculture and other livelihoods were not possible. Sami children from non-reindeer herding families were put to local schools with non-Sami children and expected to become "proper Swedes". In both these school systems, however, Sami languages were forbidden, so also the Nomad school aimed at linguistic assimilation.

skills gave them status and money, since they were compensated for being a mentor. A shift had happened, and now their Indigenous language was seen as something positive – but such a shift takes time and patience to process. It is also important to remember that although the Elders were mother tongue speakers, some of them had not used the language actively during many years, and it takes time to get the language flowing again. So with this in mind, the original plan was necessarily modified in order to allow more time for common gatherings. As one mentor explained,

I have lost my childhood and because of the boarding school, I missed growing up with my relatives. It is a reason why the Sami community has been destroyed. It is lacerated. It is terrible how they have treated us, the Sami people. Many of us are hurt, and they are hiding their Sami identity. (Elder female)

After a couple of common gatherings, participants noticed that the need to process the history declined. The mentors were starting to get used to their role as mentors, their language was flowing, and they had gotten used to the new social and professional situation in which they found themselves at the SLC. For example, one of the female mentors commented: “Of course we have met each other before on different occasions in the Sami community but we never spoke Sami and there was no focus on our language, like during these gatherings.”

As this article goes to press, it is now a few years since *Bihkedäjja* was launched, and one of the female mentors notes her personal transformation:

I notice a difference, I dare to claim that my language is a beautiful language. I was told that my language is ugly, that I speak an ugly dialect, and that it is not real Sami. I have felt uncertain and been in imbalance. I think that it is my view of the language that has changed. I have gained the confidence to enjoy it, believe that I have a beautiful language, that my parents spoke a nice Sami dialect. The sorrows are coming now. I haven't had so much grief before, because I have been able to speak my language. The grief has come now, and that is because I didn't dare more and that I didn't fight more. I should have fought more for my language.

Thus we observe that a key take-away from *Bihkedäjja* is the great need to address sorrow over a lost language and negative experiences that the mentors carried with them from their pasts. During a gathering, they could sit and share memories from their times in boarding school and discuss with each other since they shared common experiences. This was powerful for apprentices to understand as well, and one male apprentice of the Lule Sami mentor program offers,

During our first common gathering we shared why we wanted to take part in this program and what our dream for our language was. We all shared our sorrows. It became obvious that all of us had gotten to believe that we are not complete. Our people suffers from a colonial oppression and it became obvious that we believe that we are not complete human beings.

This process taught us that revitalization is not just about starting to use the language again; we need to focus on healing and deliberately create a space where there is room and time for grieving, sharing and remembering.

#### *The need to belong to something bigger*

Everyone in Sami society carries an experience of forced assimilation on one level or another. For some, the experience might be the sorrow of language loss, for someone else, it is the childhood you never had or the family that got shattered by state assimilation practices. The stories are so many and so personal. Through the SLC programs we have described, new discussions emerged where those experiences had to be addressed but also with focus on how to move forward. Suddenly, there was a public awareness that inability to utter Sami was not due to stupidity or individual flaw, but rather due to language block, and moreover, they were not alone in experiencing it. This block was shared by mother tongue speakers as well as upcoming learners.

Sharing in this realization was part of the dawning of a new kind of language community that was most awaited among the Sami. Now more and more people were included, and a focus was put on the process of



language revitalization both for mother tongue speakers and new learners. As one of the male apprentices recalls,

Suddenly, you are in a large context with others who speak Lule Sami, and it spreads like rings on the water that I am one of those learning Lule Sami. This means that everyone wants to help, even people outside the mentor program. And it is nice that there are many around you who understand that you want to learn. They understand that I am a beginner. I have a context. It is a cultural home that you are rooted in, and the people you are rooted in, as well. I learned a lot from other people, a lot that I wouldn't otherwise be conscious of. I got to know geography and people and what families they came from. In Sami culture, knowledge about family kinship and the land is essential.

The interaction between the mentors and their young apprentices resembled the traditional Sami way of learning. In the Sami community, knowledge has been transmitted when children have joined their families, working together with common tasks, and in this way they have learnt what they were meant to learn. This is an important part of Sami culture. We are also deeply connected with the land and every Sami language is a result of the communication with the land. Without the land we would not be Sami people. In a recent article titled *Silent knowledge can save lives* the Norwegian police address the deep knowledge of the land that exists in the Sami language and how it can save lives:

The Sami language is descriptive and compared to Norwegian, it is very rich in description of nature, the weather and other natural phenomena. The language tells us about the dangers that can threaten, what to guard against, and preferably also how. The Sami place names are also descriptive, both in terms of form and possible degree of danger. It is therefore sad when these names are translated into something similar in Norwegian - without having the

description that the Sami place name has. In the original name, very important information may be lost to the rescue service.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of community became very obvious through *Bihkedäjja* and *Language Block*. Taking back one's Indigenous language is not a one-person show. Reclaiming Sami is done together with community, and from there, the language community grows as more people become willing to dialogue in Sami once they have dared to start speaking. A female apprentice emphasized the importance of the support she received from the Elders:

Participating in the mentor program gave me a direct connection with the Elders who spoke South Sami. The Elders were incredibly gentle with me. The reception I received from them and the motivation they gave me made me believe that the Sami language really was something for me. The language is loaded with meaning and valuable. Language is very important both for communication and identity. Now having the Sami languages, it's like I have filled up something in my heart that I didn't know was missing. All words and formulations have opened up to my own culture and to other people.

*“Just keep on talking, at the end I'll understand what you say”*

The programs launched through the SLC have shown possible ways forward for revitalization of Sami languages. The arenas encompassing the programs gave participants the opportunity to not only share their stories, but also to hear and speak the language, to talk about their dialects and sayings, or just relax and listen to the language flowing. Starting to speak Sami is a process that demands a lot of time, and learners felt vulnerable, but in this space is also where the healing and *fun* is. Our languages are our medicine, and they reconnect us with our ancestors and the earth.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://www.politiforum.no/artikler/taus-kunnskap-kan-redde-liv-i-norske-fjell/464947?fbclid=IwAR3F11NfDISuderDrGt4hkKneJeMiRSPgr9ZRMovOAmGvvkby1jWcLezTf8>

The first leap out into speaking is the most challenging for learners, and frightening, but only learners can take the leap, no one else. Mentors and apprentices alike needed to understand that time and patience is required when our Indigenous languages return into our being and physical body to truly become *ours*. In *Bihkedäjja*, apprentices were chosen among students studying South Sami at the university. They knew basic grammar, but many had not yet started speaking the language, nor had they heard it used in everyday life.

One of the male apprentices shared his first experience of sessions with his female mentor. They were together driving to their ancestral village. The apprentice was trying to speak Lule Sami, and the mentor encouraged him by saying: “Just keep on talking, at the end I’ll understand what you say.” This statement shows that while deep and meaningful conversations may not constitute initial exchanges, through the mentor’s encouragement, there would eventually be. Furthermore, the transformation from being a passive language user (having limited exposure and usage of the language) to becoming an active one (using the language daily and to convey more complex thoughts) was a challenge that *Bihkedäjja* participants in particular had to face. The positive outcome in Sami communities today is that there are more role models, those who have taken the leap and the mother tongue speakers encouraging and guiding in the process.

However, there also does exist a phenomenon of language policing, whereby a mother tongue speaker harshly corrects a learner or other speaker’s language usage. The language police have silenced speakers who stopped using the language after these tough encounters. The SLC actively initiated discussion about different methods of correcting learners, so it seems that the power of the language police has faded. We conclude that language purism is a contentious language ideology issue that can impact revitalization negatively, and therefore should be addressed so that a “tolerable level of disagreement” can be fostered (Kroskrity 2009, p. 73). Of course there are still issues, but now there also is awareness about different methods of correcting language learners, and since there are traumas connected to the history of Sami language, we must be aware of how to

correct someone's language in a delicate way. One mentor-apprentice pair offered their own method: "I talked, and then my mentor repeated what I said. We had an on-going conversation." Regardless, reclaiming Indigenous languages is hard work, but the process is rewarding. As one of the female apprentices expresses, "It is a continuous process, to learn the language. I think about it everyday. But I know that what I have learned is greater than the struggle."

Based on participant reflections, we observe that the transformation from passive listener to active speaker was a big and difficult step for many learners. But it was also a challenge for the Elders to take the step and become somebody's language mentor and start using their language more actively. Together with their apprentices, they started to search in their memory for words and sayings, and they started remembering the language together. Remembering their mother tongue. In the mentor program, the Elders seemed aware of the difficulties of the learners. While working and chatting together, they gently guided their apprentices, who still were in the very early stages of language acquisition. The Elders could also keep talking and let the apprentices relax and just listen. While doing practical things together they used their bodies and all their senses to learn the language. In that way the focus was much wider and more varied than in a language class.

*What am I allowed to be?*

Is there space in community for all of our stories and identities? That is an important question to ask in revitalization. We are all human beings spending a short amount of time on this earth together. Hopefully there is room for all our different identities in the process of decolonization and revitalization. Hopefully there is room for many different ways of being a Sami. However, sometimes the idea of what a Sami person is and what Sami culture is can get very narrow.

During the era of forced assimilation, the Sami people found their own identities restricted, and they were forced to assimilate, to essentially become someone else. That is why in the process of language revitalization,

we sought to create arenas where we could become *who we really are* and where there is room for all our identities, even those coloured by the Swedish language. For example, we had to remember that many of those Sami wanting to reclaim their Sami language had Swedish as their first language. The Swedish accent is detectable when those speakers speak Sami. This colouring is a part of our mutual history as Sami in Sweden, and we shall not be ashamed of that. One of the male apprentices expressed this sentiment:

I must be allowed to have a Swedish accent. I'm not a worse Sami person because of that. I shouldn't be afraid of colouring my Sami with my Swedish thoughts. It can actually be quite humorous. *I'm not a half, and I am not becoming more Sami as I gradually learn more Sami. I'm trying to take something back that was lost, but I don't feel that I am more or less Sami now when I'm taking back my Sami language.* (our emphasis)

This is key in Sami ideology—we have not lost our Sami-ness. We are and always have been Sami, and our languages are still ours. We must have this ideology and related attitude in mind when creating language revitalization projects, and we have to be conscious of our scars and our history, not as inhibitors but perhaps even as assets no matter how hurtful to admit.

### *Women and men*

We note that the majority of the people working with Sami language revitalization and as teachers of Sami are women. Of course, there are also men working with the language, but they have not been so active as teachers. As stated by a female mentor,

It is the women who have been responsible for transmitting the Sami culture to the children. The men have been working with the reindeer herding and have spent a lot of time away from home. That is why there are more women working with language and transmitting the core values of the Sami culture, called *saemie vuekie* in South Sami which translated could be 'the Sami way'.

In *Bihkedájja*, it was relatively easy to find female mentors but more of a challenge to find male mentors. Of the apprentice applications volunteered, the majority were women. We speculate that one reason is the men have not been as active in the public forum of the Sami language community from the outset. Most of the female mentors were already well-known in language revitalization and with a history of having worked professionally as teachers or in language planning. Thus, in order to reach potential male mentors, we had to map local communities to locate them and then encourage them to participate. The focus for us was recruiting remaining mother tongue speakers, and speaker gender was not prioritised.

The SLC did observe the lack of men participating in language revitalization activities, and in order to reach more men, an event was arranged hosted by a man and with hunting terms in Sami language as the topic. Unfortunately, not so many men showed up on that occasion. Based on our reflection, we speculate that in order to reach men in language revitalization it might be a good idea to co-arrange events in connection with events that men usually attend, for example the annual SSR<sup>9</sup> meeting or the local Sami village meetings. During the last couple of years *Sáminuorra*, the national Sami youth association, have together with the gender equality project *Mannen myten*<sup>10</sup> been arranging meetings where young Sami men gather together and discuss the male role of the Sami man. Collaborating with projects like this could be an excellent way to engage more men in language revitalization. We noticed that men find it more difficult to talk about their sorrows and other emotions than women, and it is possible that this is one explanation as to why there are so few men engaged in language revitalization as the process is heavily emotional, and processing emotions and traumas from the past is the core of healing and revitalization.

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<sup>9</sup> SSR = Svenska samernas riksförbund [The National Union of the Swedish Sami].

<sup>10</sup> Arvsfondsprojektet *Mannen myten* [Inheritance Foundation project “The Man The Myth”], see <https://mfj.se/bryt-normer/mannen-myten/>.

We did ultimately find some male mentors and apprentices as participants. Nevertheless the commitment to gatherings was a challenge for active male reindeer herders—which is a Sami cultural and professional activity—since the reindeer are the first priority; herders follow nature’s schedule (the animals and their environment), and nature cannot be scheduled. One of the mentors was a man who was not active anymore as a reindeer herder. He was able to attend the meetings, and he was an important addition to the group with his rich language from a life of herding reindeer. Therefore, based on our desire for inclusion and the potential rich exchanges resulting from this type of expertise, we realize that there is a great need to adapt revitalization programs to suit circumstances that also impact gender imbalances in language revitalization representations.

Despite gender imbalances of less Sami men holding Sami language teacher roles, there is change taking place and during the last couple of years, more and more men are visible and active in using and working with the language in society. Today and through the work of the SLC, we have observed examples of young men choosing to transmit Sami language to their children. Young men are also using Sami in the social media, sharing with others their dedication to the language. One of the reasons why men have become more visible might be that there has been a status change regarding language skills. Sami languages are increasingly viewed as valuable and associated with positive values and status. The language is also regarded as one of the most important identity markers and something that gives people a context.

In the pairing of mentors and apprentices during *Bihkedäzza*, the most important criterion was that the mentors were mother tongue speakers. It was also important that they were from the same area as the apprentice to ensure that they could share stories of the land and community. The apprentices could wish for a mentor whom we contacted, but in some cases the apprentice had no knowledge of existing mother tongue speakers in their area. In those cases we mapped the local community in search for a mentor, and the gender of the mentor was not an issue. We had three male mentors in *Bihkedäzza*, and they were paired

with female apprentices. One of the apprentices had her own father as her mentor, and they had many of their sessions when working with the reindeer. Another of the male mentors had actually worked as a mother tongue teacher of Sami language for children in Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. He was also quite unique in having studied Sami language at the university.

An interesting aspect related to gender and the Sami language is that there does not exist a female or male language, the Sami language is in that sense gender neutral. In Sami communities, we have also been able to see signs of traditional boundaries between the sexes becoming increasingly blurred, for instance when Sami men engage in sewing Sami traditional clothing, or when South Sami women are active in reindeer herding on the same level as men. Snowmobiles and other modern equipment have helped to speed this process. Nevertheless, in Sami language revitalization, the imbalance between the sexes is still apparent.

When writing this article, we have also reflected on meaning related to our own gender, as well as ethnicity and identity in the revitalization context. Both are important aspects in the work. Patricia is both North and South Sami, which gives her a vast network and knowledge of the invisible social structures in North and South Sami areas. This helps her connect and relate with other women working with revitalization, particularly as the Sami culture is a family-oriented culture, and how we are related to each other is central to the Sami community. One of the first questions you get when you meet a new Sami acquaintance is about your family relations.

Patricia also points out that traditionally in the Sami community, the woman is a doer: someone who knows how to work and solve problems. She is strong and independent as one has to be in the Arctic region since the nature is harsh, and you need to learn to take care of yourself. And being a Sami woman is an asset when working with revitalization in Sami community since female values are distinct from Western society. The Sami woman is a strong woman with a strong and healthy body. She has a central role in the family and traditionally has been listened to and highly respected.



Leena in her role as a researcher in language loss and revitalization, has often felt that it is an asset to be a woman and have the experience of raising children in a bilingual family. Also, being a Sweden Finn with a mother tongue historically stigmatized and devalued in Sweden, she found it easy to identify herself with Sami mothers and their efforts to maintain the Sami language in the home. She also believes that the Sami women felt similarly, which made meetings and discussions deeper and more meaningful. In the sphere of language and culture transmission, there seemed to be many more similarities than differences between them. And despite Sweden's official gender equality policy, childcare in the home still remains predominantly a women's issue, and in preschool and school, female teachers dominate—facts that also facilitate the work of female researchers like Leena interested in language revitalization among children and the young.

*Gieležirkuš: a new way to involve body and joy in language reclamation*

Gieležirkuš/Language circus is a new method developed by Patricia, in cooperation with Giron Sámi Teáhter, the Sami theater in Kiruna, a city in northern Sweden. Through combining circus practices and language, a new way of working with revitalization has come into being. In the process of learning Indigenous languages, you may sometimes feel just like the clown in the circus—the one who says things in the wrong way, the one who seems to make a lot of mistakes all the time. On other occasions, everything seems to fall into place, and you are a tightrope dancer high up in the air, saying the right words, conjugating verbs correctly. Then again, you might step into the role of the juggler, juggling with words, dropping them, and then picking them up again, throwing them high up in the air, and still juggling.

Using the archetypes from the circus world, Gieležirkuš was developed in close collaboration with circus artists who had mother tongues other than Swedish. These artists had been working with *Clowns without borders*, an organisation that travels to conflict areas in the world with the mission to spread laughter, joy and hope to the children in these

areas<sup>11</sup>. For a moment, they give children a chance to forget the everyday struggle and just have a good laugh.

In our Language Circus, we strive to add joy and laughter in the revitalization context. We visit one school after another and together with the children we play with languages and the body. We set up our silvery camping tent in the school gym and when the children enter our world, our languages start being heard. We mix Finnish, South Sami, North Sami, Spanish, German and Lule Sami. And although the children do not speak all these languages, they seem to understand everything. It is as if no block existed but we are in another world altogether. We should really be in this world much more often because there, languages do not separate us from another, they vibrate between us. Key words for the process are “play,” “body,” and “laughter,” and never using the dominant language. Instead, other languages including Sami languages, are used as means of communication. The idea is to show that language is so much more than grammar, writing and reading. We see the children and the Language Circus as being on an excursion together, searching for what language really is, in the world of languages. We make somersaults in Spanish, juggle in South Sami, and build pyramids with our bodies together in German. Even when non-Sami speaking school children join us, the language is not an obstacle. They start using the Sami words they hear and translate them into their mother tongue. We understand each other.

In other words, we want to make the children feel that the Sami language is a living language and not just a subject at school. We want the children to see that Sami is not only spoken in the classroom or at home with parents, but it is heard every now and then, here and there. It is important to show the children that Sami can be spoken in unexpected places, by unexpected people. We must encourage them to dare begin to speak, and we must tell them they should not be afraid of making mistakes. On the contrary, it is good to make mistakes. There simply must be mistakes! The language is meant to move into your body and to create a

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.cwb-international.org>.

Sami nervous system, and a bloodstream pulsating of verbs, particles, love, and do or die. The shame and the sorrow are also there, but hopefully they will create an extra sound when you speak.

The Language Circus has shown that by combining play and language, and including the body in the process, everyone can be included. There are children who seem to have more energy than others, and for some children who are not that outgoing, the Language Circus may seem a bit frightening. However, they still participate by observing, and sometimes they join in after a while, sometimes they do not—and this is okay. Language Circus shows us that there are continuous and new innovations that can be considered in Indigenous language revitalization, and that multiple languages are also important to recognize in the world of language revitalization.

### **Conclusion**

Language reclamation and revitalization can not be successful if not locally-anchored and steered by speakers or potential speakers. Nevertheless, favourable official policies can make it possible for language communities to get basic funds toward opportunities needed for robust and continuous efforts. In Sweden, the human rights commitments of the state since the year 2000 and 2010 have no doubt made it more legitimate in the public realm to work for language revitalization and to use the Sami language in public. We have heard informal commentary from Sami Language Center participants that the new policy and law makes speakers feel that they now have a right to speak Sami in the streets of their cities and not just in the home. Through the SLC, national language policy has enabled the Sami in Sweden to launch new, innovative ways of tackling language shift and loss. The work continues, and we now see former project participants choosing to use Sami despite not being mother tongue speakers. We also see these speakers inspiring new generations of Sami to take the leap and proudly reclaim their Sami languages.

In this article, we began with the power of emotions surrounding revitalization, especially those resulting from sufferings during forced assimilation policies and Sami identity stigmatization. We recognize that

colonization has not ended, neither has assimilation, and we now witness a race between dominant language assimilation and Indigenous language revitalization. We assert that it is high time to curb further assimilation and strengthen our efforts to speed up Sami language reclamation.

One of the lessons learned through the work of the SLC is that we have to create safe spaces for discussions that may be painful but are urgently needed for healing, and in order to process the past—which still influences the present. We have to break the silence of our people that has lasted all too long. We have seen strong initial emotional reactions and blocks in our Sami communities, and we have learned that language reclamation is not only about grammars and word lists—the process is so much more! We also acknowledge that revitalization of Sami languages is not only about lost languages that must be heard and used again, but also about creating new contexts where we can reword our languages and experiences and innovate new approaches that are inclusive like the Language Circus. We also accept that this all takes time.

In the mentor program, Elders were empowered by their new role in language and culture transmission. For some, this experience was the first time in their lives that they were appreciated and praised by their communities for being carriers of invaluable linguistic and cultural knowledge. The contact between Elders and their apprentices also gave the apprentices a new feeling of belonging to something bigger, the community of speakers and Sami cultural identity.

The reality today in Sapmi is a multitude of identities, some more accepted in the community than others. For many people, Sami identity seems to be intimately intertwined with the way one speaks Sami. Some learners felt inhibited that their Sami language was strongly influenced by Swedish. They were afraid of not speaking well enough and of being criticized by self-appointed language police who commented and corrected their language in insensitive ways. This linguistic purism is a threat to all language revitalization, and one of the tasks of the Sami Language Center has been to spread tolerance vis-à-vis different Sami varieties, including dialects, accents and learner errors. The same goes for the question who is accepted as a Sami person. One's language ability should not influence the

right to claim Sami identity, and we assert that the Sami community should accept Sami identity irrespective of Sami language loss, and to what degree the Sami person is in the process of reclaiming it. With the history of Indigenous oppression and assimilation, many Sami are struggling to reclaim their languages, and they are not any “less Sami.”

While language teaching and revitalization efforts have generally engaged more Sami women than men, it appears that more men are joining, especially young men. As the status of Sami has become more publicly visible, the number of men engaged in language work at the SLC seems to be rising as well. Their participation has been long and urgently needed

Together, men, women, children, and participants of all ages can take part in language revitalization, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Language Circus, which looks at language learning from a holistic perspective. As Patricia reminds us, language learning should engage body and mind in the process. While the SLC programs have demonstrated much success in adult language acquisition, we also point out that it is essential for children to acquire Sami. For them, learning the language should ideally involve joy and laughter, just like a real circus. Sami children should feel that in learning Sami, there is ample room for play, creativity, and growth that includes *all* their identities, and our desire is that they and Sami community members see our many identities as gifts to the Sami community.

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