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North Saami, Čohkkiras variety (Sweden, Norway) – Language Snapshot

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| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Language Name: | North Saami (also Northern or Norwegian Sámi, Sami, Same, Saame, Lapp, Lappish); Čohkkiras ¹ (Jukkasjärvi) variety |
| Language Family: | Saamic, Uralic |
| ISO 639-3 Code: | sme (North Saami) |
| Glottolog Code: | nort2671 (North Saami) |
| Population: | about 1,000 |
| Location: | Giron (Kiruna) and Jiellevárri/Váhčir (Gällivare) municipalities in Sweden; Romsa ja Finnmárku (Troms og Finnmark), and Nordlándá (Nordland) counties in Norway |
| Vitality rating: | EGIDS 6b |

Summary

North Saami (endonyms: *sápmi* or *sámeigiella* ‘Saami language’, *davvisámeigiella* ‘North Saami language’) is a Uralic language spoken by the indigenous Saami minority in the Arctic region of Norway, Sweden and Finland. In this paper, I outline the current situation of the language and present my own work in documenting and describing the endangered and under-described Čohkkiras variety, spoken in Sweden and Norway.

¹ The standard North Saami orthography is used throughout this paper. Where applicable, place names are given in North Saami, with the corresponding name in the majority language given in brackets at first mention.

1. Overview

The Saami (North Saami endonyms: *sápmi* or *sápmelaš* ‘Saami person’; plural *sámit*, *sápmelaččat*) are the indigenous people of northern and central Norway and Sweden, northern Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of northwestern Russia. The exonyms ‘Lapp’ and ‘Lappish’, found in older literature, are considered derogatory. Traditional Saami livelihoods include reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting, and although these activities remain important in Saami society, most Saami are employed in other sectors today. The Saami in Russia and the Skolt Saami in Finland are traditionally Orthodox Christians; other groups are predominantly Lutheran Christians. The Laestadian revivalist movement has a particularly strong position in the North Saami area. A concise introduction to Saami society, history and culture is given in Beach (1994).

Through the Saami Parliaments in Norway (inaugurated 1989), Sweden (inaugurated 1993) and Finland (in its current form since 1996), the Saami of the Nordic countries have a limited degree of political influence, e.g. in matters concerning Saami culture and livelihoods. The Saami population is not known, but based on the electoral rolls of the Saami Parliaments and on the latest Russian census, there are at the very least some 30,000 individuals: 16,958 in Norway (2017), 8,766 in Sweden (2017), 5,873 in Finland (2019) and 1,771 in Russia (2010). Note however that these figures are not readily comparable; among other factors, voter enrollment for the Saami Parliaments is voluntary and certain conditions apply, along with a voting age of 18. Some sources estimate a total population of over 100,000 (e.g. NE 2019).

The Saamic languages constitute the westernmost branch of the Uralic language family. Many different classifications of the Saamic varieties have been proposed since the 1600s (see Rydving 2013: 27-82). Today, a division into ten different languages is widely accepted. Of these ten languages, North Saami occupies a central geographic position, being spoken in northernmost Norway, Sweden, and Finland. As a consequence of forced relocations of Saami reindeer herders in the early 1900s, speakers of North Saami are also found in areas of Sweden where other Saamic languages are traditionally spoken. Speakers of North Saami are further found outside the traditional settlement area, e.g. in the urban areas of southern Norway, Sweden, and Finland. In all three countries where North Saami is spoken, the Saamic languages are officially recognized; legal support includes the right to use Saami in contact with authorities, and the right for children to study Saami, although conditions vary between and within the three countries. Some three out of four speakers of a Saamic language speak North Saami, making it the largest language of its branch. Estimations of the speaker population range from 12,700 to over 20,000 (see Table 1, over page).

Table 1: Estimated number of speakers of North Saami

| | Korhonen (1981: 17) | Sammallahti (1998: 1) | Valijärvi & Kahn (2017: 8) | Eberhard et al. (2019) |
|--------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Norway | 9,000-10,000 | 10,000 | 12,000-13,000 | 20,000 |
| Sweden | 2,000 | 5,000 | 5,000-6,000 | 4,000 |
| Finland | 1,700 | 2,000 | 2,000 | 1,700 |
| Total | 12,700-13,700 | 17,000 | 19,000-21,000 | 25,700 |

The most important languages in contact with North Saami are the majority languages Norwegian and Swedish (both North Germanic, Indo-European), and Finnish (Finnic, Uralic). In Sweden, an important contact language has also been Meänkieli (Finnic, Uralic), a language historically regarded as a variety of Finnish, but since 2000 recognized as a national minority language of Sweden (see Arola et al. 2012). North Saami has also been in contact with Kven, a Finnic minority language of Norway, which like Meänkieli was previously seen as a variety of Finnish, but since 2005 enjoys official recognition (see Räsänen & Kunnas 2012). All adult speakers of North Saami are bilingual or multilingual, speaking one or several of the majority languages, and in some cases also another minority language. Lexical borrowings from the majority languages are common, as is code-switching.

North Saami is traditionally divided into three distinct, but mutually intelligible dialect groups: the so-called Finnmárku (Finnmark) dialects in Norway and Finland in the northeast (with a western and an eastern subgroup), the Sea (or Coast) dialects along the northern coast of Norway, and the Duortnus (Torne) dialects in Sweden and Norway in the southwest (see, e.g., Korhonen 1981: 16). The Duortnus dialects can be further divided into the Gárasavvon (Karesuando) dialects in the north and the Čohkkiras dialects in the south. The Finnmárku dialects are the most populous, making up perhaps two thirds or more of the total speaker population. The dialectal variation of North Saami is most thoroughly described for phonology and morphology; differences in syntax and lexicon are less studied (see, however, Rydving 2013). To name but one phonological difference, the Duortnus dialects have generally merged /ʃ/ with /s/, whereas the Finnmárku and Sea dialects keep the two phonemes apart. North Saami is to a large degree mutually intelligible with its southern neighbor Lule Saami, and it is also closely related to Inari Saami in the east.



Figure 1. Approximate locations of North Saami dialects.

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For larger map see page 185.

While the vitality of North Saami varies between different areas, it is safe to say that the language is definitely endangered. With the exception of a few municipalities in the Finnmárku dialect area, e.g. Guovdageaidnu (Kautokeino) and Kárášjohka (Karasjok), speakers of North Saami are in a clear minority. In large parts of the North Saami area, there are few domains for using the language outside the home and traditional livelihoods, and many children do not learn North Saami as their first language. Even so, speakers' attitudes towards the language are overwhelmingly positive. The precarious situation of the language has given rise to a number of local revitalization programs, as well as national campaigns by the Saami Parliaments, promoting the use of Saami.

There is some media in North Saami, including daily radio broadcasts and a fifteen-minute TV newscast, seen in all three countries. There is also a modest production of literature, as well as two translations of the Bible (1895 and 2019). The current orthography, established in 1979, is based on the Finnmárku dialects, and uses the Latin script with a number of additional characters: *á, č, đ, η, š, t, ž* (roughly corresponding to IPA *a:, tʃ, ɔ̃, ŋ, ʃ, θ, dʒ*). A common Nordic resource center for the Saamic languages, *Sámi Giellagáldu*, is responsible for language planning, e.g. providing recommendations for new terminology.

The first grammar of North Saami was published more than two and a half centuries ago (Ganander 1743). The most comprehensive modern description of the language is the pedagogical grammar of Nickel & Sammallahti (2011), which relies heavily on Nielsen's influential description of the Finnmárku dialects (1926). Other pedagogical descriptions of the written standard language include Valijärvi & Kahn (2017) in English, as well as Svonni (2018, 2019) in Swedish and North Saami, respectively. Noteworthy is also Lagercrantz (1929), which describes the Sea dialects of Norway.

North Saami is a nominative-accusative language with SVO as the neutral word order. In the standard language, finite verbs are inflected in three persons, three numbers, two tenses and four moods; there are also a number of periphrastically marked TAM categories. Nouns are inflected in two numbers and six cases; possession is optionally marked with suffixes. The arguably most emblematic feature of North Saami is its extensive consonant gradation, a morphophonological process affecting the quantity and/or quality of word-internal consonants and consonant clusters, e.g. *guolli* 'fish (nominative)' vs. *guoli* 'fish (genitive-accusative)'.



Figure 2. Bilingual (Norwegian and North Saami) street sign

Áhkánjárga (Narvik) municipality, Norway. Photo © 2018 Olle Kejonen

2. Current research

Since 2017, I have been undertaking a PhD at Uppsala University, Sweden, with the aim of writing a grammatical description of North Saami. The grammar will be based on a spoken corpus of the under-studied Čohkkiras variety, of which I am a second language speaker. While North Saami as a whole must be seen as fairly well described, there is no modern grammar of the language based on spoken data. Furthermore, there is no comprehensive description of the Čohkkiras variety, which in many respects differs from other varieties and from the written standard language. The few studies that exist are more narrow in scope, the most noteworthy being Collinder (1949) on morphology, and Hansegård (1967) on Meänkieli loanwords.

My research is focused on the southernmost part of the Čohkkiras dialect area, which I further divide into a western and an eastern main dialect. The eastern dialect is spoken in the southern parts of Giron municipality and the northern parts of Jiellevárri (or Váhčir) municipality in Sweden; the western dialect is spoken in the southernmost parts of Romsa ja Finnmarku county and the northernmost parts of Nordlândia county in Norway. In some respects, the western dialect is more conservative, for instance having preserved the Proto-Saami nominative plural suffix *-k* (corresponded by *-h* or zero in the east; *-t* in the standard language). In other respects, it is more innovative, e.g. using plural forms of personal pronouns and finite verbs where the eastern dialect retains the dual number.

The Čohkkiras variety is more endangered than many other varieties of North Saami. Language proficiency is intimately connected with traditional livelihoods, in particular reindeer herding, and older speakers generally have a better command of the language than younger speakers do. Literacy in North Saami is rare and speakers' attitudes towards the standard orthography are often negative, not least due to the special characters not found in the majority languages. I estimate that the Čohkkiras variety is spoken by some 1,000 individuals. The total speaker number may be somewhat higher, and the number of fully fluent native speakers might be lower. The great majority of speakers live in Sweden, and the number of native speakers in Norway may be as low as a few dozen or less, a fact underscoring the urgency of linguistic documentation and description.

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Figure 1. Approximate locations of North Saami dialects.

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