

Mikael Reuter

Swedish and Finnish as pluricentric languages

Both Swedish and Finnish are official languages in Sweden and Finland.

In Sweden, Swedish is in practice the main official language (though paradoxically enough so far not legally confirmed), whereas Finnish is the most largely used officially recognized minority language, with certain rights mainly in some municipalities in northern Sweden.

In Finland, Finnish and Swedish are both official “national languages” according to the constitution.

Swedish is the mother tongue of about 8 million people in Sweden (more than 90 per cent) and about 290 000 people in Finland (5.6 per cent), and Finnish is the mother tongue of 4.8 million people in Finland (93 per cent) and maybe up to 200 000 in Sweden. The citizens' mother tongue is not registered in Sweden.

1. Historical background

Sweden and Finland have a long common history, which explains especially the status of Swedish in Finland. The so called first crusade from Sweden to Finland took place round 1150. From then on, and mainly in the 13th and 14th centuries, there was a considerable and apparently almost totally peaceful Swedish settlement in the coastal regions of Finland. Finland became the eastern part of the Swedish realm, and the citizens in that part had the same political rights as those in the original mother country (see map below). From the 16th century Turku/Åbo was one of the most important towns in Sweden, and this was confirmed by the establishment of Åbo Akademi as Sweden's third university in 1640.

In the war of 1808-1809 Sweden lost Finland to Russia, but the old Swedish laws remained in force in Finland and Swedish continued to be the main language of administration and education. However, Finnish was rapidly developed as a fully fledged language through purposeful efforts of 19th century scholars, and in 1863 the Russian emperor gave a language decree stating that Finnish within 20 years was to be on equal footing with Swedish in central administration. In practise it took slightly longer than that, but from the early years of the 20th century Finnish had gained its position as the primary language in administration and legislation. At that time the Swedish speakers were about 340 000 or 13 per cent of the population.

Finland gained its independence in 1917, and the Constitution of 1919 stated that Finnish and Swedish were the national languages of the republic. More detailed regulations were given in the Language Act of 1921.

In absolute figures the number of Swedish-speakers reached its peak round 1940, with more than 350 000 persons (a little less than 10 per cent of the population). By 1980, the number had gone down to 300 000 (6.3 per cent).

2. Finnish and Swedish in Finland today

The following table shows the number of unilingual and bilingual municipalities in 2003 and the number of speakers with Finnish and Swedish as their reported mother tongue:

31 December 2003		Municipalities	Number of speakers (mother tongue)	
			Finnish	Swedish
I	Unilingual Finnish	381	3 558 041	13 032
IIA	Bilingual, majority Finnish	21	1 205 721	138 678
IIB	Bilingual, majority Swedish	23	37 383	98 791
III	Unilingual Swedish	19	2 198	39 367
Whole country		444	4 803 343	289 868
				5,6 %

As we can see from the table, almost 48 per cent of the Swedish-speakers lived in municipalities with a Swedish majority and 52 per cent in municipalities with a Finnish majority (4.5 per cent in unilingually Finnish municipalities). Of the Finnish speakers more than 25 per cent lived in bilingual or Swedish municipalities, which is remarkable considering that 85 per cent of the municipalities were unilingually Finnish (see linguistic map of present day Finland below).

In the new Constitution of 2000, the section on the national languages has the following wording:

“The national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish.

The right of everyone to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts of law and other authorities, and to receive official documents in that language, shall be guaranteed by an Act. The public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an equal basis.”

The new Language Act of 2004 contains basically the same regulations as the one from 1921, but it is written more clearly and explicitly.

“The purpose of this Act is to ensure the constitutional right of every person to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts and other authorities.

The goal is to ensure the right of everyone to a fair trial and good administration irrespective of language and to secure the linguistic rights of an individual person without him or her needing specifically to refer to these rights.

An authority may provide better linguistic services than what is required in this Act.”

As before, acts are adopted and published in Finnish and Swedish. Also decrees and legal rules issued by authorities are issued in both national languages.

On the local and regional level, bilingual administration is dependent on the linguistic status of the municipalities. A municipality is designated bilingual if the population includes both Finnish and Swedish speakers and the minority comprises at least eight per cent of the population or at least 3,000 persons. A bilingual municipality is designated unilingual if the minority comprises less than 3,000 persons and its proportion has decreased below six per cent. On the recommendation of the municipal council, Government may determine by a Government Decree that the municipality is bilingual for the following ten year period even if the municipality would otherwise be unilingual. Regions or authorities that include several municipalities are bilingual if at least one of the municipalities is bilingual.

Swedish can be used in practically speaking all domains of society in Finland. There is a complete educational system, from kindergarten and primary schools to vocational training and university level. The Finnish broadcasting company sends Swedish programs over two radio channels and one TV-channel. As many as 11 daily papers are published in Swedish, one of which is in principle nation-wide. Swedish and bilingual parishes are organized within a Swedish Diocese. There are half a dozen professional theatres performing in Swedish, and the Swedish-language publishing houses print over a hundred books yearly. Even military tuition is given in Swedish within one brigade.

The Swedish Assembly of Finland is a semi-official body representing the Swedish-speaking population. Politically, the Swedish speakers are represented by the Swedish Peoples Party (presently with two ministers in the government) and by Swedish subdivisions of other political parties. A network of organizations of various kind help to unite people with Swedish as their main language.

The department of Swedish at the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland has about a dozen employees, half of whom work with language planning and language cultivation.

Generally speaking, one could describe the Finland-Swedish identity as Swedish (or bilingual) in terms of language and language-related culture but as Finnish in terms of nationality. Swedish-speaking Finns are supporters of the Finnish team in an ice hockey match between Finland and Sweden.

3. Finnish in Sweden

Finnish has been used in Sweden since the middle ages, and there has been a Finnish parish in Stockholm since the 16th century. However, almost all the present Finnish speakers, except for those in northern Sweden, are immigrants or children of immigrants from the mid or late 20th century.

Finnish is by law an official minority language in Sweden since 2000. Finnish-speakers have the right to use their language with the authorities in certain municipalities in northern Sweden, and it has been suggested that this right should be extended also to parts of central Sweden with many Finnish-speaking inhabitants.

A regional variety of Finnish (meänkieli 'our language') traditionally spoken in northern Sweden in the region close to the Finnish border (Tornedalen) also has a legal status as an official minority language. It is hitherto a predominantly spoken language (maybe 30 000-40 000 speakers) and thus very weakly standardized. It is not taken account to in this article, as it is considered a separate language.

About 10 per cent of the authorities in Sweden have web-information in Finnish. There are a few Finnish-language schools not only in northern Sweden but also in other parts of the country. The public service radio sends about 2 hours daily in Finnish (plus regional programmes) and daily news in Finnish on TV.

The formerly private Finnish language board in Sweden is now a unit within the Language Council of Sweden.

Compared to the Finland-Swedish identity, the Sweden-Finnish identity seems to have slightly different characteristics. It is Finnish (or bilingual) in terms of language and language-related culture, but due to fairly recent immigration it is often Finnish also in terms of nationality: Finnish speakers in Sweden are often supporters of the Finnish team in an ice hockey match between Finland and Sweden.

4. Swedish language planning and cultivation¹ in Finland

The Swedish language board of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland has published an action program for Swedish in Finland. In connection with that, the language board set up four major principles for Swedish language planning in Finland:

- Swedish in Finland is – and must remain – a complete language, serving and uniting our society (ett komplett och samhällsbärande språk);
- Swedish in Finland is a form of standard Swedish;
- The best way to cultivate a language is to use it;
- Working for one language does not mean working against another language.

It has been suggested that the Swedish used in Finland should be considered a language of its own because of the many differences compared to Swedish in Sweden. Let us therefore take a look at those differences.

Differences can be seen on almost all linguistic levels. In spoken language, the most apparent differences can be noted in pronunciation, whereas in written language the most easily traced differences are lexical (so called finlandisms) and syntactical. In spelling there are practically speaking no differences, and in morphology very few.

In pronunciation the most noticeable difference is in intonation – both sentence intonation and word intonation. Swedish in Finland lacks the phonemic opposition between acute and grave word accent: *anden* is pronounced in the same way whether it is the definite form of *and* ‘duck’ or *ande* ‘spirit’, whereas in Sweden-Swedish it is pronounced with acute accent in the former case and grave accent in the latter. Other differences in pronunciation are certain features of quantity (syllable length) and stress, and also vowel and consonant quality.

However, differences in pronunciation do not generally affect intelligibility. It is in fact often easier for a person from Stockholm to understand a Swedish speaker from Finland than one from southern Sweden. Finland-Swedish pronunciation is also fairly well accepted in Sweden, e.g. in radio and TV. A Swedish-speaking Finn would never seriously attempt to imitate Sweden-Swedish pronunciation.

Among the lexical differences can be mentioned official words related to society and legislation (Fi. ministerium/Sw. departement), archaisms (barberare/herrfrisör), loan words from Finnish, but also from Russian and German (maskingevär/kulspruta), translation loans from Finnish and certain semantic differences: *semla* is in Finland a roll, often with ham or cheese, in Sweden a cream bun with almond paste (cf German *Semmel* in Austria and Germany).

Syntactic differences relate to word order, use of the genitive case, use of prepositions etc. Most of them are due to influence from Finnish.

¹ I use *language cultivation* for what in German is called *Sprachpflege* and in Swedish *språkvård*.

Also a number of sayings are common for Finnish and Finland-Swedish. *Lyfta katten på bordet* (to lift the cat on the table) means to take up a problem and mention it by its real name. To eat or accept something *med långa tänder* (with long teeth) means to eat it or accept it reluctantly. The corresponding expression exists not only in Finnish but also in e.g. Russian, Dutch and Afrikaans; maybe it is originally Dutch?

It is impossible to say how many the “finlandisms” (lexical and phraseological differences) are, but maybe the number is about one or two thousand in the active vocabulary (1-2 per cent?). Most of these occur only in informal language. A text in a Swedish newspaper in Finland typically includes 1-10 features characteristic to Finland-Swedish per one thousand running words. Most of these will be easily understandable to readers from Sweden, although they give an unidiomatic or unfamiliar impression.

Swedish language planners in Finland have consistently argued for the importance of keeping the differences between Swedish in Finland and Swedish in Sweden as small as possible. The arguments for having a common language are obvious:

- Common literature (children's books, fiction and non-fiction, manuals etc.);
- Common dictionaries (particularly bilingual), encyclopaedias etc.;
- Possibilities for studying and working in Sweden (several Swedish speaking Finns have made a career as journalists etc. in Sweden);
- Same language in the EU;
- Status in the surrounding world (why should the Finns care about learning “Finland-Swedish” if it cannot be used in the neighbour country?).

Consequently, the “fight against Finlandisms” has been going on for more than a century. The most important work is Hugo Bergroth's book *Finlandssvenska.Handledning till undvikande av provinsialismer i tal och skrift* (A guide to avoiding provincialisms in speech and writing) from 1917, which has been a source for knowledge and inspiration to later generations. Active efforts have been made in mother tongue teaching on all levels and naturally in the work of the professional language planners, since 1976 within the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland. Worth mentioning are also language columns in newspapers and books like *Svenskt lagspråk i Finland* (A guide for writing legal texts in Swedish; first edition 1986) and *Finlandssvensk ordbok* (Descriptive and normative dictionary of Finland-Swedish words and expressions; first edition 2000). In 2002, the first version of the spelling and grammar checker *Svefix*, detecting about 2 000 finlandisms, was issued as the result of cooperation between the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland and Oy Lingsoft Ab (a company supplying spelling and grammar checkers for MS Word).

Among the activities of the Swedish language cultivation unit of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland can be mentioned a telephone and e-mail service, the magazine *Språkbruk*, close contacts with authorities, translators, schools, organizations etc., language specialists working with mass media and language checking of textbooks etc.

5. Finnish language planning and cultivation in Sweden

Organized language cultivation and advice on usage in Finnish has been carried out in Sweden since 1975. For the first thirty years, the institution responsible for these activities was a private organization, *Ruotsinsuomalainen kielilautakunta/Sverigefinska språknämnden*

(the Finnish language board of Sweden), with government subsidies from Sweden and partly also from Finland. When the new Language Council of Sweden was established as a government agency in 2006, the activities and personnel of both the Swedish and the Finnish language board were transferred to the Language Council.

Just like the Swedish language cultivation unit in Finland, the Finnish language cultivation unit of the Swedish Language Council keeps up a telephone and e-mail service, publishes a quarterly magazine (*Kieliviesti*) and supplies various kinds of other services.

Finnish language planning and cultivation in Sweden has a slightly different basis compared to Swedish in Finland. Linguistically, the main difference is that there is no stabilized form of “Sweden-Finnish” comparable to that of Finland-Swedish, mainly because Finnish has been used continuously in Sweden for a relatively short time. The status is also different. As Finnish is not a “national” language in Sweden like Swedish in Finland, Finnish is not used officially in e.g. legislation. However, there is a constant need for adapting the Finnish language to the Swedish society and coining Finnish words for Swedish institutions and phenomena, and this has always been one of the main tasks of the Finnish language board in Sweden.

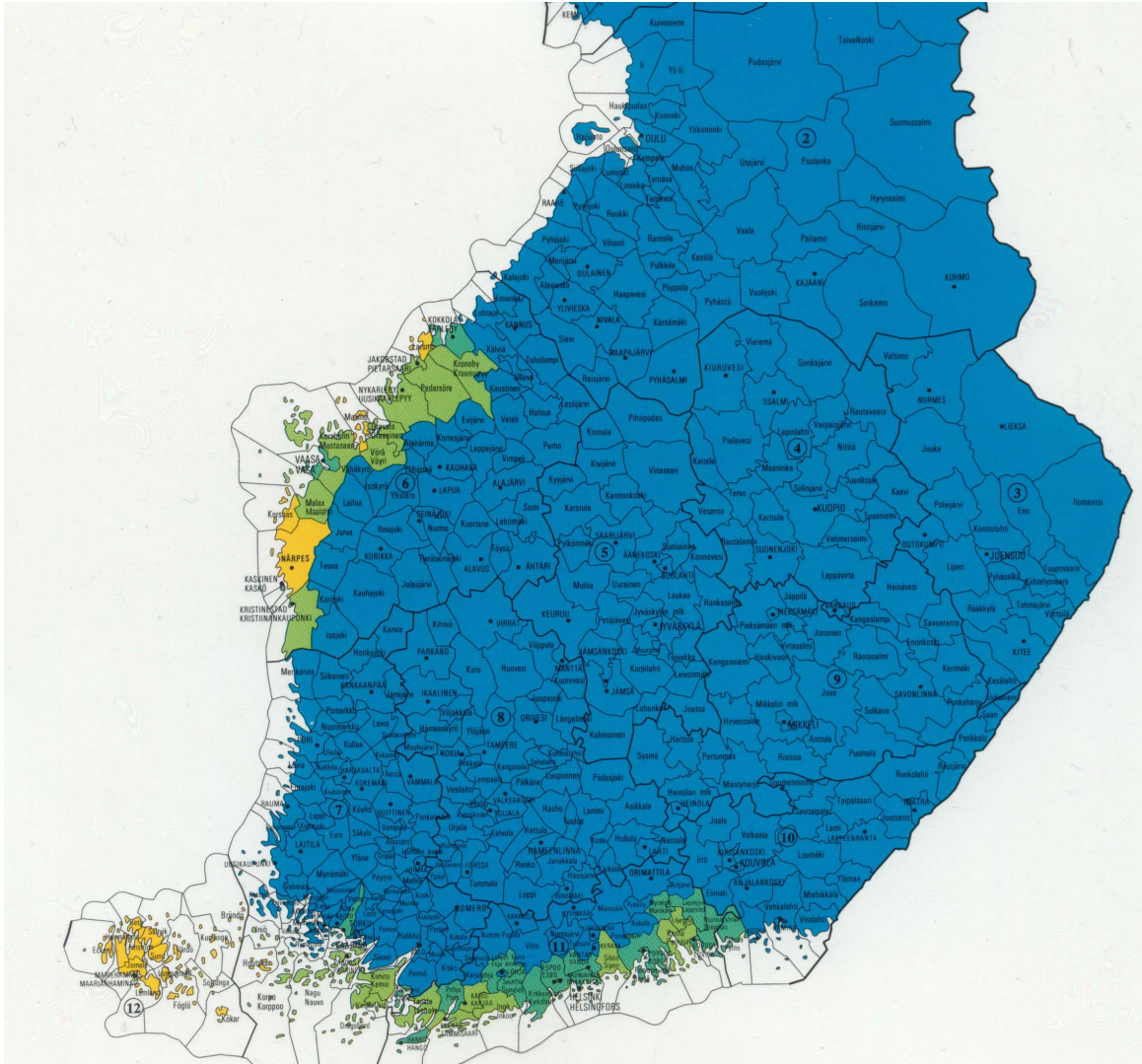
Generally speaking, Finnish language planning and language cultivation in Sweden follows the same main principle as that for Swedish in Finland: the aim is that Finnish used in Sweden should be as close as possible to Standard Finnish. Lexical and terminological differences that are necessary because of differences in society and institutions are naturally accepted, but otherwise the Finnish used in Finland should be the model.

Consequently, the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland and the Swedish Language Council work closely together in matters related to Swedish and Finnish language planning and language cultivation. Standardization takes place in Sweden for Swedish and in Finland for Finnish, but in the case of Swedish, also representatives from Finland take part in the process of standardization.

6. Figures



Sweden (with Finland) in the 14th century



The southern part of Finland at the end of the 20th century.
Blue = unilingually Finnish, green = bilingual, yellow = unilingually Swedish