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The national minority languages in Sweden – their status in legislation and in practice

Abstract: De nationella minoritetsspråken i Sverige – deras status i lagstiftning och i praktiken

År 2000 blev finska, jiddisch, meänkieli, romani chib och samiska nationella minoritetsspråk i Sverige, i samband med att regeringen undertecknade Europarådets minoritetsspråkskonvention. Finska, meänkieli och samiska identifierades som territoriella språk och fick en högre skyddsgrad än de icke-territoriella språken jiddisch och romani chib. Det finns betydande skillnader mellan de fem nationella minoritetsspråken vad gäller inte bara laglig status utan också beträffande antal talare och attityder från majoritetsbefolkningen. Finska, som är det i särklass största minoritetsspråket och det andra största språket i Sverige, har en stabil position i det svenska samhället men har samtidigt blivit i viss mån "osynligt". Meänkieli och samiska, särskilt sydsamiska, är de språk som är akut mest utrotningshotade. Jiddisch har mycket få modersmålstalare, men den judiska minoriteten utgör å andra sidan en välorganiserad grupp. Lägst status i majoritetssamhället har (fortfarande) den romska gruppen och det romska språket.

In year 2000 Sweden ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Five languages were officially recognised as national minority languages, namely Finnish, Meänkieli (Tornedalian Finnish), Yiddish, Romany and Sami. Common for these languages is that they have been spoken in Sweden for hundreds of years. Sami, Meänkieli and Finnish were identified as regional languages, in contrast to Yiddish and Romany. Sami, Meänkieli and Finnish are historically spoken in the Norrbotten County. Finnish is also spoken in industrial districts along the coast of Norrbotten, in Stockholm and the district of Mälardalen and in the big cities in general. Speakers of Romany live above all in the three largest cities. This holds also for Yiddish-speakers.

It is difficult to estimate the number of speakers of the different minority languages since Sweden does not collect official statistics about this. The figures I give below are coarse estimations, building in principle on Parkvall (2009) – where the author insightfully compares and discusses various reports of number of speakers of the languages in Sweden.

Finnish is the second largest language in Sweden with approximately 200 000-250 000 speakers. Parkvall estimates the speakers of Meänkieli to something between 15 000 and 45 000 – but in the literature there are estimations as high as 75 000-100 000! During the last 25 years the speakers of Meänkieli have been reduced with 40 percent, according to Parkvall. There are about 10 500-12 000 speakers of Romany, and between 3 500 and 7 000 speakers of Sami; three quarters of these speak North Sami, around 15% speak Lule Sami and only 10% speak South Sami. Yiddish is the smallest minority language, spoken approximately only by around 1 500 people. Very few of these have Yiddish as their mother tongue.

1. The legislation concerning minorities and their languages

Up to now, the authorities have taken few initiatives to improve the situation for the national minorities, e.g. as regards bilingual education. In addition to the European convention, national laws (SFS 1999:1175; SFS 1999:1176), entered into force 2000, state that three of the minority languages – Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami – may be used in judiciary institutions and public administration in specific areas (“administrative districts”) traditionally inhabited by substantial numbers of persons belonging to the national minorities in question. Speakers of these minority languages also have particular rights regarding education in their language.

The 1st of July 2009 Sweden passed the Language Act (SFS 2009:600) – a law on the status of the languages spoken in Sweden. Besides stating that Swedish is the main language, the Language Act states that the earlier official minority languages shall have the status as national languages. The Swedish Sign Language is placed on a par with the five minority languages although it does not have the status as a *national* minority language. According to the Language Act the five national minority languages, as well as the Swedish Sign Language, have to be protected and promoted. Further, everyone belonging to a national minority language has to be given the opportunity to learn, develop and use his/her language. But also other languages are mentioned: the last paragraph states that everyone who has a mother tongue other than Swedish, the Swedish Sign Language or a national minority language has to be given the opportunity to develop and use his/her mother tongue. The fact that the minority languages are included in the same law as Swedish no doubt raises the status of these languages.

The Language Council of Sweden has been commissioned to follow up the realization of the Language Act. The Language Council is the common body of language care, embracing Swedish, Finnish, Romany, Meänkieli, the Swedish Sign Language, and Yiddish. (The Sami Parliament is responsible for the language care of Sami.)

The 1st of January 2010 a new law that strengthens the rights of the minorities entered into force (SFS 2009:724). This law is valid for all of the five minority languages – not only for the regional ones, Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami. The law states that the authorities are to protect the minorities and promote the minority languages. Importantly, the new law regulates the rights of the national minorities to participation in decisions affecting them. With this law the administrative areas for Sami and Finnish, respectively, are expanded, from 4 to 13 for Sami and from 5 to 18 for Finnish. This means that 40% of the Finnish speaking minority now is comprised by the law, compared to only 5% before. Not only municipalities in the northern part of Sweden are included in the Finnish administrative area but also cities in the middle and south of Sweden. For instance, the capital, Stockholm, is now part of the administrative area for Finnish.

Outside these areas individuals have the right to use Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami in communication with authorities, if there is linguistically skilled staff available. Speakers of all national minority languages always have the right to use their language in

written communication with the ombudsmen of the Parliament, the Chancellor of Justice, the Social Insurance Office, the National Tax Board, and the Office of the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination.

Individuals should also have access to elderly care and preschool in Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami, respectively, again provided there are employees proficient in the language in question.

2. The situation for the national minorities in Sweden

Of the five minority languages it is in the first place South Sami and Meänkieli that are severely threatened. There are few young speakers and the bilingual education must be strengthened if the languages should not disappear. As regards Romany (and also Meänkieli) there is a great demand for documentation and standardization. The status of Finnish has increased during the last 30-40 years, but at the same time the language has become more “invisible” in the community. Finnish-speaking people in Sweden are well integrated in the society. The number of speakers is however decreasing; there are few children who speak Finnish and participation in bilingual education is continuously diminishing.

The speakers of Yiddish constitute a very little but well organized group. The practical consequences of being a national minority have up to now been more or less zero for the Yiddish-speaking people; the effect has above all been symbolic.

3. Language instruction in minority languages

The model of teaching is of central importance for the surviving of the minority languages. In Sweden the national minorities are offered language instruction in accordance with the mother-tongue education model, i.e. language is taught outside the regular curriculum and only between 20 minutes and 2 hours per week. Bilingual education (up to 50% teaching in the language) plays a marginal role. The rules for mother-tongue education are however more generous for the national minorities than for other minorities. Education should be provided even if only one pupil requests it and even if the language concerned is not in daily use at home. However, there is one demand concerning mother-tongue tuition in general that holds also for the national minorities: the pupil must have basic knowledge in the minority language in order to get mother-tongue instruction. In practice, this demand is an obstacle for children who are beginners in the minority language. If the minorities should be able to revitalize their languages, this obstacle must be removed. A further obstacle is the lack of competent teachers resulting in that language instruction occasionally is denied also when pupils have legal right to it.

4. Attitudes of the majority of the population towards minority languages

Even if the authorities have an explicit intention to counteract discrimination against minorities and the use of minority languages, there are still to some extent negative attitudes in the Swedish-speaking majority towards the national minorities and in

particular towards Romanies. Several follow-ups of the minority laws have shown that the minorities only to a limited extent use their language in contact with authorities and courts (cf. Prop. 2008/09:158, 171ff.). There might be several reasons for this, e.g. deficient information about the legislation or deficient skill in minority languages by the staff. But individuals may also hesitate to use their language in contact with the authorities due to linguistic factors, such as lack of administrative terms, inability to express oneself in written communication in the minority language, or fear that the authority person will not understand (Elenius/Ekenberg 2002). As pointed out by the Committee of Experts on the application of the Charter (ECRML 2009, 46) it is very rare that citizens submit a written application in minority languages. Only oral communication takes place in these languages. Finally, the assumption that the authorities lack economical resources or will to use the minority languages might have a restraining effect on the usage.

The passing of the Language Act has made the national minority languages more visible to the public. There is a positive interest towards these languages, but also a certain questioning of the choice of languages that have got official status. In particular the choice of Yiddish is questioned. Firstly, the number of speakers in general is low, not to mention the number of native speakers, i.e. speakers whose first language is Yiddish. Secondly, people are not in general aware of the fact that Yiddish has been spoken in Sweden since the 18th century. (Also Meänkieli has sometimes been questioned, as it can be argued that it is a dialect of Finnish.) In relation to this discussion, the question is sometimes raised why not, e.g., Arabic, one of the largest minority languages in Sweden, may become an official minority language, or why not Övdalian, a Swedish dialect spoken in the central of Sweden? Whereas there is a small group of linguists and people, mainly from the Övdalian county, who argues that Övdalian should get the status as national minority language, there is no real opinion towards making Arabic a national minority language. (In addition, Arabic does not yet fulfil the criteria for becoming a national language: the language has to be spoken at least three generations in Sweden.) Overall, there is no general support among the public to enlarge the number of minority languages.

There are also societal initiatives that can, and have been, interpreted as a result of negative attitudes towards the use of minority (immigrant) languages in general. For instance, the Liberal Party suggested in February 2009 that instruction in special subjects in school, such as mathematics and English, should always be done in Swedish, not in a “foreign mother tongue”. The motivation was that the pupil's development in Swedish would be suffering. The reaction from other political parties, as well as from many individuals, was however strong and the Liberal Party withdraw their proposal.

5. Summary

There are significant differences between the five official minority languages in Sweden as regard status, number of speakers and historical relation to the majority language. Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami are regional languages with a higher degree of

protection than Romani and Yiddish which are identified as non-territorial languages. Finnish is the largest minority language, Yiddish the smallest one. Sami and Meänkieli are today the most threatened ones.

Among the public there is an intuitive understanding of the reasons to give four of the five languages official status, but as regards Yiddish people tend to question the motivation. Also Meänkieli has sometimes been questioned, as it can be argued that it is a dialect of Finnish. The attitudes towards the minority languages differ. Finnish has got a significantly higher status during the last decades – but at the same time it is losing ground and has become more “invisible”. Romany is (still) the language that has the lowest status in the society of the minority languages.

6. References

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SFS 2009:724: *Lag om nationella minoriteter och minoritetsspråk.* [Act on National Minorities and Minority Languages.]

