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## Multilingual public websites in Finland

### Abstract

This paper presents a case study of the websites produced by Finnish authorities. Our main task is to show how the public sector promotes or does not promote the use of the national and minority languages and other languages used in Finland on the internet, and how virtual information is offered in those languages. The data consist of websites of universities; ministries; Parliament; various public service institutions, e.g., Kela = the Social Insurance Institution of Finland; state research institutes; municipalities and a number of other state institutions. The investigation shows that the Finnish public sector and universities are multilingual, but mostly in Finnish, English and Swedish. If other languages are used, the information provided is quite limited. Some positive exceptions can be mentioned: the Ombudsman for Minorities and the Finnish Police with 17 languages on their websites, and with the Finnish Immigration Service with a website in 11 languages. In addition, many municipalities and the Finnish Immigration Service use a common Information Bank, an online service which supports immigrant integration by providing information on Finnish society and its services in 15 languages.

### Tiivistelmä

Artikkelissa käsitellään Suomen viranomaisten ja korkeakoulujen verkkosivuja. Tarkoituksena on osoittaa, miten Suomen julkinen sektori suosii tai ei suosi kansalliskielten, vähemmistökielten ja muiden kielten käyttöä internetissä ja miten milläkin kielellä tarjotaan informaatiota verkossa. Aineisto koostuu yliopistojen, ammattikorkeakoulujen, ministeriöiden, eduskunnan, erilaisten julkisten palvelulaitosten, kuten Kelan, valtion tutkimuslaitosten ja eräiden muiden valtion laitosten sekä kuntien verkkosivuista.

Tarkastelu osoittaa, että Suomen julkisen sektorin ja korkeakoulujen verkkosivut ovat monikielisiä, mutta niillä on käytetty enimmäkseen vain suomea, englantia ja ruotsia. Muilla kielillä tarjotaan tietoa melko rajallisesti. Myönteisinä esimerkkeinä mainittakoon vähemmistövaltuutetun toimisto ja Suomen poliisi, jotka tarjoavat sivuillaan informaatiota 17 kielellä, sekä Maahanmuuttovirasto, joka käyttää sivuillaan 11 kieltä. Lisäksi monet kunnat käyttävät yhteistä Infopankkia, palvelusivustoa, joka tukee maahanmuuttajien kotoutumista tarjoamalla tietoa Suomen yhteiskunnasta ja palveluista 15 kielellä.

### Sammandrag

Artikeln behandlar finländska myndigheters och högskolors webbplatser. Syftet är att visa på vilket sätt den offentliga sektorns webbplatser främjar eller låter bli att främja användningen av de nationella språken och minoritetsspråken liksom andra språk i Finland samt att visa på vilka sätt den offentliga sektorn erbjuder information på dessa språk. Materialet består av webbplatser för universitet, yrkeshögskolor, ministerier, riksdagen, offentliga serviceinstitutioner (t.ex. Folkpensionsanstalten), statliga forskningsinstitut, ett antal andra statliga institutioner och kommuner.

Undersökningen visar att den offentliga sektorn och universiteten i Finland är mångspråkiga, men de språk som förekommer på webbplatserna är oftast endast finska, engelska och svenska. Om andra språk än dessa förekommer är informationen relativt begränsad. Goda exempel är dock Minoritetsombudsmannen och den finska polisen som båda har information på 17 olika språk på sina webbplatser, liksom Migrationsverket i Finland som informerar på 11 olika språk på sin webbplats. På många kommuners webbplatser förekommer länkar till den så kallade Infobanken, som är en webbplats som stöder integrationen av invandrare genom att tillhandahålla grundläggande information om det finländska samhället på 15 olika språk.

The linguistic environment has changed during the past few decades in Finland, just as elsewhere in the world. Multilingualism in our country has increased, and people have contacts with more language groups and environments than ever before. Hence, using different languages is necessary in our real and virtual life.

The changes in the environment have also led the public institutions, e.g., state authorities into a situation where they have to shoulder more responsibility for providing the information needed by the multilingual public. The internet is one forum where the language policy of a country can be implemented. It is also a forum where a country's language policy, as it is put into practice by the authorities every day, can be displayed.

Our study is a tentative case study of the websites produced by Finnish authorities. Our main task is to show how the public sector promotes or does not promote the use of the national and minority languages and other languages used in Finland on the internet, and how virtual information is offered in those languages. Our purpose is to present the linguistic landscape of the Finnish public sector on the web, to investigate which languages the authorities use on their websites, and to discuss what kinds of matters the authorities present in different languages.

Our data consist of the websites of universities, ministries, Parliament, public service institutions, e.g., Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland), state research institutes, some other state institutions, including the Academy of Finland, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes), the National Archives Service of Finland, the National Library of Finland and the National Board of Antiquities, and municipalities. First, before describing the current language use on the websites, we will give some background information and look at the paragraphs in the general legislation regarding the languages of information in Finland. In addition, we will briefly refer to the current need for information in the language landscape of Finland.

## **1. Public services in legislation**

According to the Finnish Constitution (Section 17), the national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish. The right of everyone to use their own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts of law and other authorities, and to receive documents in that language, is guaranteed by an Act. The public authorities should provide for the educational, cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an equal basis. "On an equal basis" means, among other things, that the public authorities have to give information in both languages (Suomen perustuslaki/Finlands grundlag 731/1999).

The same content is also included in the Language Act (2003). A bilingual authority, be it a state authority or a bilingual municipal authority, must use both Finnish and Swedish in their information to the public. The information does not necessarily have to be equally comprehensive in both languages. There is a danger that it is possible to interpret the relevant paragraph in different ways, in practice so that Swedish is needed less (Kielilaki/Språklag 423/2003).

According to the Sami Language Act (2003), everyone has the right to use the Sami or the Finnish language, as he or she may choose, and the authorities in the Sami domicile area have to provide services in Sami languages. All three Sami languages, North Sami, Inari Sami and Skolt Sami, are included in the act, but none of these languages are accorded the same legal status as Finnish and Swedish. Skills to give information in Sami are necessary for the authorities in the Sami domicile area in the northernmost part of Finland (Saamen kielilaki 1086/2003).

Especially during the past few decades, the population speaking languages other than Finnish or Swedish as their first language has increased in Finland. This means that there are an increasing number of people who need information in their own languages or in languages they use as a second language. For example, in Helsinki, 10.2% of the total of 600,000 people speak other languages than Finnish or Swedish as their first language. In the whole country, 4% of the population have another first language than Finnish, Swedish or Sami. Hence, the information in many languages is needed in everyday life. The most widely used first languages are Russian, Estonian, Somali, English, Arabic, Kurdish, Chinese, Albanian, Thai, Vietnamese, German, Turkish, Farsi, Spanish, and French (OSF 2010).

There are no explicit paragraphs in the Finnish legislation concerning language use on the internet. With the exception of Finnish and Swedish, the authorities and institutes have to judge for themselves how and in which languages they offer information and guidance in the virtual world. One might ask if a separate language policy is needed for the internet. Richard Domeij, who has investigated the use of languages on the internet in Sweden, has made a proposal on how to make such a policy programme (cf. Domeij 2010, 35-39). Also, the Finnish language policy programme has emphasized that the internet is an important channel for offering information in the public sector (Suomen kielen tulevaisuus 2009, 214-216).

## **2. Information in higher education: universities and polytechnics**

There are 16 universities in Finland. Aalto University, consisting of the School of Art and Design, the School of Economics and the Schools of Technology, together with the University of Helsinki, are bilingual (Finnish and Swedish). Åbo Akademi and Hanken School of Economics are Swedish-speaking universities. All the other 12 universities are officially monolingual Finnish. In addition, there are 25 polytechnics in Finland, mostly funded by the state and municipalities.

The languages used on the websites of Finnish universities and polytechnics are presented in table 1.

On the 16 websites of the Finnish universities and the 25 of the Finnish polytechnics, we found information in just 4 different languages. Finnish and English dominate, especially on the websites of the polytechnics; and there are 12 different websites providing information in three languages, Finnish, Swedish, and English – in varying degrees. Only one polytechnic in Helsinki offers information in 4 languages: the two national languages, English, and Russian.

Languages	Universities	Polytechnics
<b>Finnish, English</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Finnish, Swedish, English</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>
Finnish, English, Swedish	2	1
Finnish, English, Russian	1	1
Swedish, Finnish, English	1	–
Swedish, English, Finnish	–	2
Swedish, English	–	–
Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian	–	1
Total	16	25

Table 1: The languages on the websites of Finnish universities and polytechnics in order of appearance

Lappeenranta University of Technology in eastern Finland also makes available web pages in Russian, but behind the links at the Russian page, we find English again. So, the information in Russian is limited as compared to that in English. Two polytechnics, one in Helsinki and one in Eastern Finland, also provide information in Russian, but this is not extensive.

Our investigation shows that the universities are mostly trilingual in Finnish, Swedish and English, and the polytechnics are bilingual, though not in the national languages, but rather in Finnish and English.

### 3. Languages used on the websites of state research and cultural institutes

There are 19 state research institutes in Finland analyzing and guiding various areas, e.g., climate, forest, agriculture, environment, health and welfare, economy, consumption, and language. The languages used on the websites of the Finnish research institutes are presented in table 2.

Languages	Institutes
<b>Finnish, Swedish, English</b>	<b>12</b>
Finnish, English, Swedish	<b>5</b>
Finnish, Swedish, English, German, Russian (Finnish Forest Research Institute)	1
Finnish, Swedish, English, Sami, Finnish Romani, Finnish Sign Language (Research Institute for the Languages of Finland)	1
Total	19

Table 2: The languages on the websites of the Finnish research institutes in order of appearance

As state institutes, all of the research institutes comply with the Language Act and provide information both in Finnish and in Swedish. Finnish and Swedish information is mostly available to a more or less equal degree. The third language is English. There are only two institutes which offer information in more than three languages.

The Finnish Forest Research Institute has comprehensive pages in, e.g., German. In addition, there is some information in Russian. This is necessary, because the Finnish forest industry and research have much cooperation with the German, Karelian, and Russian industries and researchers.

The Research Institute for the Languages of Finland offers information in Finnish, Swedish, English, the Sami languages, Finnish Romani and the Finnish Sign Language. Hence, there is information in and about all of the languages the institute works with.

The main research funding state institutes are the Academy of Finland and the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes). The cultural institutes are the National Archives Service of Finland and the National Library of Finland. The language spectrum on their websites is the following:

Academy of Finland: Finnish, English, Swedish;

The Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation: Finnish, Swedish, English, Chinese, Japanese;

The National Archives Service of Finland: Finnish, Swedish, English, Sami, Russian;

The National Library of Finland: Finnish, Swedish, English.

As usual, all of the four institutes offer information in Finnish, Swedish and English on their websites. The National Archives Services of Finland also offers information in Sami and Russian. Sami history and culture is part of Finnish history and culture, and there is a lot of material about the life of the Sami people even in the national collections. Russian archive materials, especially from the nineteenth century, are important for researchers of the political history of Finland.

The Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation has offices in China and Japan. Therefore, the funding agency also offers service in Chinese and in Japanese.

In summary, our results show that the national languages of Finland and English are the languages of web information in state research and cultural institutes. Other languages are available if there are clear economical and practical reasons to provide information in those languages, e.g., Russian, German, Chinese, and Japanese; or if there are cultural reasons for offering information in indigenous and minority languages like Sami, Romani, and the Finnish Sign language.

#### **4. The languages used on the websites of Finnish state authorities**

For this study we also looked at the language use on websites of 33 different Finnish authorities. These authorities include seven ministries, the Finnish Parliament, and the most common providers of public services in Finland, for instance the Finnish Food

Safety Authority, the Finnish Tax Administration, the Consumer Agency, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, the Finnish Immigration Service, and the Finnish Police – in other words, authorities who deal with issues such as health, taxes, social insurance, consumer information, law and order, and security.

On the 33 websites of the Finnish state authorities we found information in 23 different languages. It is clear that Finnish, Swedish and English dominate as a whole, and all of the 33 different websites do, in fact, offer information in these three languages. Thus, one can draw the conclusion that the Finnish authorities are trilingual. All the ministry websites included in the study provide information in Finnish, Swedish, and English, exclusively. This trilingualism seems to constitute a policy – either written or unwritten – for all the Finnish ministries. Other languages used on the websites of Finnish state authorities are presented in table 3.

Language	Number of websites	Language	Number of websites	Language	Number of websites
<b>French</b>	6	Chinese	2	Inari Sami	1
<b>Russian</b>	6	German	2	Finnish Romani	1
<b>Northern Sami</b>	5	Kurdish	2	Portuguese	1
<b>Estonian</b>	4	Persian	2	Skolt Sami	1
Albanian	3	Spanish	2	Vietnamese	1
Arabic	3	Thai	2		
Sign language	3	Turkish	2		
Somali	3				

Table 3: Languages except Finnish, Swedish and English used on the websites of Finnish state authorities

The occurrence of 23 different languages might indicate that the Finnish state authorities are highly multilingual, at least on their websites. But in reality the use of many different languages is concentrated to just a few websites. In addition to Finnish, Swedish, and English, information in French, Russian, Northern Sami, and Estonian can be found on some of the websites. North Sami is the most widely spoken of all the Sami languages, and it can be found on five of the studied authorities' websites. The two other Sami languages, Skolt Sami and Inari Sami, are much smaller and they are almost non-existent on the websites. Information in all of the three Sami languages can nevertheless be found on one of the studied websites, i.e. the website of the Ombudsman for Minorities.

Even if the state authorities mostly offer information only in Finnish, Swedish, and English – or at least they give the impression that they offer information in these languages through the language links on the main page, there is still a chance that information in other languages may be found, as well. Some authorities occasionally present, for instance, press releases in other languages.

The most multilingual state authorities are presented in table 4.

Ombudsman for Minorities	<b>17</b>
Finnish Police	<b>17</b>
Finnish Immigration Service	<b>11</b>
Parliamentary Ombudsman	<b>9</b>
Emergency Response Centre	<b>8</b>

Table 4: Number of languages used on websites of state authorities

The most multilingual authority in our study is the Ombudsman for Minorities, which is not very surprising considering its task of advancing the status and legal protection of ethnic minorities and foreigners in Finland. The Finnish Police is also highly multilingual on its websites, where you can find information in 17 different languages. The third most multilingual authority in our data is the Finnish Immigration Service, followed by the Parliamentary Ombudsman and the Emergency Response Centre Administration, which gives information on their website on how and when to use the emergency number in eight different languages.

The 17 different languages used on the website of the Ombudsman for Minorities are Finnish, Swedish, English, all three Sami languages: Northern Sami, Inari Sami and Skolt Sami; Russian, Estonian, French, Spanish, Somali, Turkish, Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Thai and Finnish Romani.

What have been usually called the traditional minority languages of Finland, i.e. the Sami languages, Finnish Romani, and the Finnish Sign language, are not widely used on the websites of the state authorities, which was an unexpected result for us. Sami is used on five different websites and the Sign language only on three. Finnish Romani is only used by the Ombudsman for Minorities.

## **5. Language spectrum on the websites of municipalities**

In our study, we were also interested in the language use on the websites of the Finnish municipalities. In 2010, there were 342 municipalities in Finland; of these, 19 were monolingual Swedish speaking, of which 16 were in Åland. There were 31 bilingual municipalities; of these, 13 had a Swedish-speaking majority, and 18 had a Finnish-speaking majority. All the remaining 289 municipalities were monolingual Finnish-speaking municipalities.

Our study includes 55 of the Finnish municipalities. Our sample comprises both bilingual and monolingual municipalities, both small towns and cities, both university cities and municipalities from more rural areas of the country. We also found it important to include municipalities which are situated close to the Finnish-Swedish, Finnish-Sami, and Finnish-Russian language borders.

Finnish is found on 54 of these 55 municipality websites. The only exception is the municipality of Mariehamn in Åland, which is a Swedish-speaking municipality, just as all

the municipalities in Åland. Swedish is found on 37 different municipality websites and English on 45 websites. Based on this, we can establish that English is more common than Swedish on the websites of Finnish municipalities.

The range of languages used on the municipality websites is not as wide as that of the authorities' websites. We found information in just ten different languages on the websites of the municipalities. Most languages are used by the municipalities of Helsinki, Lappeenranta, and Kuopio. Helsinki, being the capital city, has a vast number of different language groups living in the city and therefore needs to offer important information in many languages. Lappeenranta and Kuopio are both university cities in eastern Finland.

In addition to Finnish, Swedish, and English; Russian and German are fairly common languages on the websites of the municipalities. German and Russian are also almost the only other languages used frequently; all the other languages noted in our data only occur occasionally (see table 5).

<b>Russian</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>German</b>	<b>14</b>
French	4
Sami	3 (Utsjoki, Sodankylä, Inari)
Estonian	1
Norwegian	1 (Utsjoki)
Chinese	1

Table 5: Languages except Finnish, Swedish and English used on the websites of 55 Finnish municipalities

The North Sami language can be found on three websites: Utsjoki, Sodankylä and Inari in northern Finland, which is the Sami region; therefore these municipalities are obliged to offer information in the Sami languages.

There is considerably variation in both the amount of and the quality of information on the websites. Many of the websites of the municipalities *seem* to have information in other languages than Finnish and/or Swedish, based on the language links on the main pages. In reality, though, some of the links only lead to half a page of information in English or German for tourists, or they contain a brief historical overview of the municipality. This kind of information is clearly not intended exclusively for the inhabitants of the municipality, but mainly aims to attract visitors to the region.

Other municipalities, on the other hand, offer a lot of information, above all in English, clearly intended for new inhabitants, students or other people with a foreign mother tongue and living in the municipality. For instance, on the website of the municipality of Oulu, a university city in northern Finland, you can find comprehensive information in



English on, for example, day care, schools, social and health services and public safety. It is obvious that the municipality of Oulu finds it important to offer information in English to all the foreign students and researchers and immigrants living in the city.

Consequently, there are two kinds of information in foreign languages on the websites: general and municipal information for inhabitants with another mother tongue than Finnish or Swedish; and tourist information only aimed to attract visitors to the region. This difference in the quality of the information can be seen, for instance, in the headings and links used on the main page. Information intended for the inhabitants is usually titled “Municipal Information”, “Immigrant's Guide”, “New Inhabitants”, or “Information for Foreigners”, whereas tourist information or information for temporary visitors is called “Briefly in English”, “Facts about ...”, “Basic Fact”, or in German: “Allgemeines” or “Die Gemeinde ...”.

The municipality of Helsinki provides information in Finnish, Swedish, German, French and Russian through language links on the main page. In addition to these links, there is also one link called “Other languages” which leads the user to Infopankki, or the Information Bank. The Information Bank is an online service which supports immigrant integration by providing information on Finnish society and its services in 15 languages: Finnish, Swedish, English, Estonian, French, Russian, Somali, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Chinese, Spanish, Albanian and Kurdish (Sorani). All the language versions are identical in format. The Info Bank offers basic information about permits, education and work, housing and social services, society, culture and leisure, and other important issues to immigrants everywhere in Finland, but particularly in the Info Bank's member municipalities. The website contains local information on the Helsinki Region (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen), Turku, Tampere, Kuopio, Rovaniemi and the Province of Kainuu. The Info Bank is based on networking, cooperation and information exchange among the authorities, the third sector, immigrants and other partners.

## **6. Summary**

There are clearly three dominating languages on the websites of the Finnish public sector and higher education: Finnish, Swedish, and English.

The websites of the universities and the polytechnics show how the language priorities in the academic society have changed: Finnish and English sites are always available, but not always Swedish. In fact, the polytechnics in Finland are bilingual in Finnish or Swedish and English. In general, Swedish is present in the academic environment less than we expected.

The state research institutes follow the Language Act closely – as is, of course, their duty – giving information in Finnish and Swedish, and, in addition, in English. There are differences in how Swedish sites have been constructed, but it is typical that there is less information in Swedish than in Finnish. Only two of 19 institutes also offer information in other languages.

The websites of the Finnish state authorities are trilingual. The use of different languages is concentrated to only a few sites. Finnish and Swedish are always present on the websites of state authorities and bilingual municipal authorities; the municipalities follow the Language Act very closely.

The traditional minority languages are not used much. One could ask oneself the following questions: Why does it look like this? Is it a Finnish “tradition” not to give information in these languages? Is it because of the status of the languages or the bilingualism of the minorities? Are the language minority groups pleased with this situation? Is this something that is going to change in the future? In the Sami area the use of Sami languages has already changed, even if there is still much to do in the real and virtual life.

There is more information in other languages than we expected. Even if as many as 23 languages are used on the websites of the authorities, it does not mean that the Finnish authorities overall are highly multilingual: the use of many different languages is, in fact, concentrated to only a few sites. The “average” Finnish authorities are trilingual.

The most multilingual authorities are those who are concerned with minorities or those who find it important to emphasize the use of everyone's own mother tongue. What we found slightly surprising was that the Finnish Police had information in so many different languages.

The results from the municipalities show that the municipalities comply with the Language Act, and do so very well. The bilingual municipalities often have identical information in both Finnish and Swedish; sometimes slightly less in the other national language, depending on which of them is the majority language in the municipality. The information that you find in other languages is often tourist information or general information on the municipality, such as history, population, and other kinds of statistics.

The municipalities whose websites offer citizens information which is clearly addressed to persons who do not have Finnish, Swedish or Sami as their mother tongue, are naturally the biggest cities and the university cities, i.e. municipalities where there are most foreigners, living there either permanently or temporarily.

Some municipalities also use the Information Bank, which is a good example of how useful information can be provided for persons with a different mother tongue than the official languages. It is also proof of what can be achieved through fruitful co-operation between authorities and municipalities in the virtual environment.

Even if our study is only a first – and quantitative – step to analyze the use of languages on the websites in the public sector, it has shown that, on the one hand, the Finnish virtual environment is mostly trilingual, and that, on the other hand, there are a number of institutions which offer service and information in several languages used by people living in Finland. We do not know if Finnish institutes and authorities are better or worse at offering information as compared with other countries, because there is no information available on the situation in other countries. It could be very interesting to compare the Finnish web landscape with the web landscapes of the authorities and institutions in other European countries.

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