

Sprog i Norden

Titel: Language politics as a new concept
Forfatter: Birgitta Lindgren
Kilde: Sprog i Norden, 2005, s. 55-60
URL: <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/sin/issue/archive>



© Forfatterne og Netværket for sprognavnene i Norden

Betingelser for brug af denne artikel

Denne artikel er omfattet af ophavsretsloven, og der må citeres fra den. Følgende betingelser skal dog være opfyldt:

- Citatet skal være i overensstemmelse med „god skik“
- Der må kun citeres „i det omfang, som betinges af formålet“
- Ophavsmanden til teksten skal krediteres, og kilden skal angives, jf. ovenstående bibliografiske oplysninger.

Søgbarhed

Artiklerne i de ældre numre af Sprog i Norden (1970-2004) er skannet og OCR-behandlet. OCR står for 'optical character recognition' og kan ved tegngenkendelse konvertere et billede til tekst. Dermed kan man søge i teksten. Imidlertid kan der opstå fejl i tegngenkendelsen, og når man søger på fx navne, skal man være forberedt på at søgningen ikke er 100 % pålidelig.

Language politics as a new concept

Birgitta Lindgren, Swedish Language Council

Language politics has become an important concept in the Nordic countries. The need to designate a language policy has been acknowledged in one country after the other, and several language policy documents have been put forward.

The overall linguistic situation is much the same in the various countries. *Internationalisation* has led to increased use of English in many domains, leading to domain losses in the national languages. Even the “larger-scale” languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish may ultimately end up as languages used only within the private sphere.

Another phenomenon is *plurilingualism*, which is mainly a consequence of increased immigration, but is also due to the fact that several of the countries have traditional minority language groups.

In general, the immigrant-related policies of the Nordic countries are aimed at achieving *integration* rather than *assimilation*. It would follow, then, that society should provide support for the use of mother tongues within the immigrant and minority language-speaking populations. The Swedish language policy programme points out that pupils develop Swedish as a second language more quickly if they are taught in their mother tongue at the same time. In the corresponding Danish document, it is stated that the principle of everyone’s right to use their mother tongue is not disputed. However, there is not, in Denmark, any general consensus regarding the idea that immigrants should keep to and develop their mother tongue.

The European Union is looked upon as entailing both opportunities and risks. Danish, Finnish and Swedish have become official languages within the Union. This has encouraged the development of translation and interpretation as working and educational areas, especially in Denmark and Sweden. As an officially bilingual country, Finland already had longstanding traditions in these areas. On the other hand, there is a risk that some Nordic politicians and officials, wishing either to save money or simply preferring to display their knowledge of English, will choose not to avail themselves of the translation and interpretation services offered in the EU organisations to the degree that would be advisable. This may lead to abandonment of the use of national languages, leaving English as the only language used in the EU organisations. Another risk is that the complicated and opaque bureaucratic style used in English and French will be transmitted to the Nordic style when the texts are translated.

Language technology is treated as an important issue in the policy documents, and is primarily viewed as useful for the Nordic languages. It is deemed necessary to invest substantial funding in this area. Resources are, in fact, at hand, and there is a lot of political goodwill, but it must all be coordinated in order to be effective.

The Nordic language community and Nordic language cooperation

The Nordic language community is founded on the mutual understandability of the Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish). And since speakers of the other domestic languages (Faeroese, Finnish, Greenlandic, Icelandic and Sami) have to learn one of the Scandinavian languages, they too are incorporated into the Nordic language community.

The Nordic language community and Nordic language cooperation are, of course, important issues in the language policy documents. The situation differs somewhat between the Nordic countries. The domestic languages that are *minority*

languages in a country, e.g. Swedish in Finland, Finnish in Sweden and Sami in Norway, Sweden and Finland, are constantly exposed to influence from the surrounding majority languages.

Swedish in Finland receives essentially good support as a formal national language alongside Finnish. But English has begun to compete with Swedish vis-à-vis Finnish speakers, and the need for Swedish as a compulsory school subject for Finnish-speaking pupils is subject to question at regular intervals. Swedish is no longer compulsory at the GCE A-level exam for Finnish-speaking students. This may have positive consequences, as only those who are truly interested will choose Swedish, which could raise the status of Swedish as a subject. On the other hand, it may have negative ramifications. If the interest in and knowledge of Swedish diminishes too greatly, Finnish-speakers will place themselves outside the Nordic language community.

The situation for *Finnish in Sweden* has now been improved somewhat due to Sweden's ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. But it remains to be seen what this will mean in practice. One problem is that the responsibility for Finnish in Sweden is widely dispersed, and thus resources are not always used effectively.

The ratification by Norway, Sweden and Finland of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages has also been positive for the *Sami* language. Here too, however, it remains to be seen what will come out of it. Sami is not the main language or national language in any country, and as such must gain domains beyond the domains of the private sphere and school. For some Sami varieties the situation is quite critical, as the number of speakers is decreasing and these speakers have virtually no knowledge of written Sami.

In the *Faeroe Islands*, *Greenland* and *Iceland*, *Danish* is still compulsory at school. In Iceland, however, English has become the first foreign language taught in school, and the interest in Danish seems to be waning. On the *Faeroe Islands*, Danish is

still much used as second language, although Faeroese can be said to be as complete a language for the Faeroe society as Icelandic is for the Icelandic society. In *Greenland*, Danish is still an important language in many areas of society. If the situation in the *Faeroe Islands* and *Greenland* evolves along parallel lines as developments in Iceland, with the ensuing disappearance of Danish as the outcome, all of these countries will place themselves outside of the Nordic language community.

Estonia

Although *Estonia* is not a member of the Nordic region, it is a close neighbour. Therefore it is interesting to compare the linguistic situation in Estonia with that of the Nordic countries. There are similarities as well as differences. In one sense Estonian is facing the same problems as the Nordic majority languages. But at the same time it is fighting, as are the Nordic minority languages, to attain new domains of usage in order to become a complete language for the society. The large Russian-speaking population is viewed as a problem, and the language policy towards them is aimed at assimilation rather than integration. Estonian language planners express greater discontent as regards present language usage levels than their Nordic counterparts. It is, however, difficult to establish whether language usage actually is worse in Estonia.

Goals for a Nordic language policy

The Nordic Council of Ministers takes a positive view of Nordic language cooperation. Unfortunately the restructuring of the Council in recent years has not been particularly beneficial in so far as language cooperation is concerned. Admittedly, there is still an administrative body for dealing with this subject, but no academically skilled linguist is included in the secretariat of this body. The general model for activities in the Council is – as in many other places – the project model. This has certain negative

consequences for basic efforts as well as other, more ongoing endeavours.

A Nordic language policy must remain focused on the traditional goal of maintaining the Nordic language community. However, the fact that the situation has changed in some respects must be taken into account. Firstly many young people are no longer primarily interested in the Nordic region. Instead they direct their attention to countries further away. The general knowledge of English is so good that, when meeting people from other Nordic countries, individuals quickly tend to switch to English instead of trying to understand the neighbouring languages. This is especially true for individuals who have one of the Scandinavian languages as their second language or as a foreign language.

The goals for a Nordic language policy could be formulated as follows:

- to maintain and strengthen the Nordic language community;
- to maintain and strengthen Nordic language cooperation;
- to enhance use of the Nordic languages and work to counter domain losses;
- to strengthen the traditional minority languages;
- to make it possible to maintain the mother tongues of immigrants;
- to develop the use of the Nordic languages as secondary languages as a scientific and pedagogical field;
- to invest in linguistic research;
- to develop the Nordic cooperation in all kinds of research activity;
- to coordinate Nordic cooperation within the field of language technology;
- to cooperate within the organisations of European Union and promote the position of the national languages there;
- to work for plain language in official texts nationally and internationally, especially within the European Union;

- to take an active part in European and international language cooperation.

According to Norwegian language planner Oddrun Grønvik, Nordic language cooperation and the Nordic language community could be a model for other areas. This model is characterised by the following:

- It is organised on the basis of the language groups rather than states.
- The language community is viewed as a valuable entity. There is an explicit will to compromise.
- The work is publicly financed and open to control.