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Language Assimilation During the Modernisation Process: Experiences from Norway and North-West Russia

TROND TROSTERUD

ABSTRACT *The article gives an analysis of the demographic material for North Sámi in Norway during the last 150 years, and compares it to key tendencies in some of the Uralic languages of the Soviet Union. The present linguistic landscape can be predicted with great accuracy from Friis' survey of 1860. At that time, bilingualism among the Norwegians was widespread in parishes with predominantly Sámi or Finnish (Kven) population. During the assimilation process, the preservation of Sámi was not due to the size of the Sámi population, but rather to its relative size. Today's Sámi communities are the ones with the least Norwegians one and a half centuries ago. A key factor in the language shift process has been mixed marriages. The Soviet data show a greater degree of language preservation, especially for the Nenets and Mari. The difference is partly a result of the Soviet language policy, but also to the degree of contact between the minority and majority populations.*

KEY WORDS: Sámi languages, North Sámi, Language assimilation, Language policy, Language revitalisation, Finnmark, Northern Norway, North-West Russia

The Sámi Languages in Norway

The Nineteenth Century

In the mid nineteenth century, the linguistic situation in Finnmark in Northern Norway was quite different from what it is today. According to the Norwegian sociologist Eilert Sundt, in 1855, the outcome of interethnic marriages in Eastern Finnmark was Sámi-speaking families:

> Whenever there is a mixed marriage, and no matter which nation is married to the Sámi one, then the Sámi nation becomes the dominant one, therefore, it is not uncommon to find among the Sámis descendants of even better Norwegian families. The Sámi nation swallows both [the Norwegian and the Finnish one], not in the first generation, not always in the second one, but almost without exception in the third one (Sundt, [1859] 1976: 193).

Five years later, the linguist Jens Andreas Friis conducted an ethnographic survey of the use of Sámi, Finnish and Norwegian in the North. Figures 1–5

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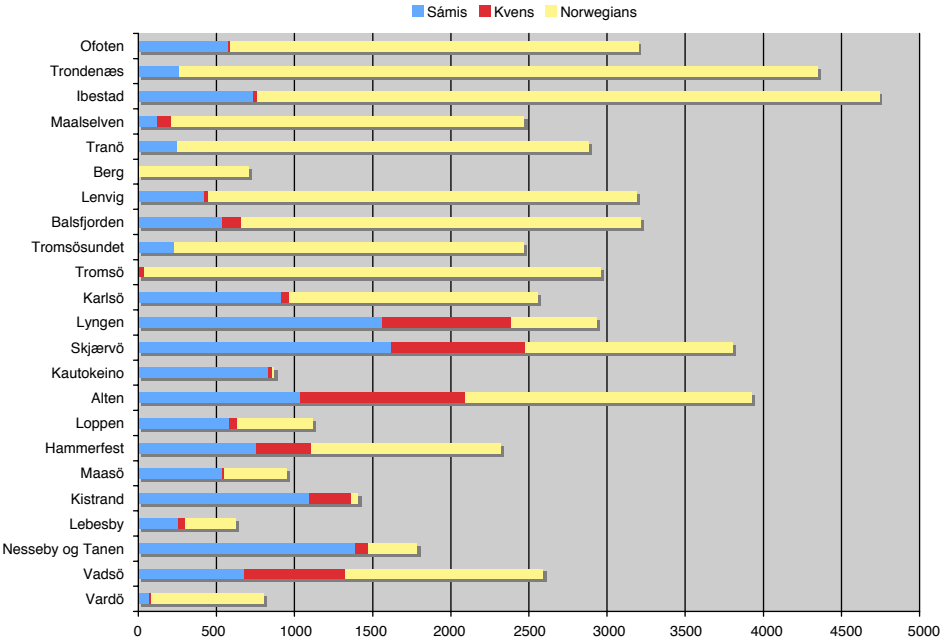

Figure 1. Ethnic distribution in Troms and Finnmark (census 1855, data from Friis 1861).

show some of his findings. Figure 1 shows the ethnic distribution in Troms and Finnmark in 1855. The parishes are listed in geographical order, from Ofoten in the south to Vardø in the Northeast.

The parish names are shown as viewed on Friis' maps. Some of the parishes correspond to several present-day municipalities; Table 1 shows the correspondence between parish and present-day municipalities.

The Norwegians constitute the majority south of Lyngen (i.e. above Lyngen in Figure 1), and half the population or more in the towns of Finnmark (Hammerfest, Vadsö, Vardö). Elsewhere, the Sámis are in the majority. The Kven strongholds can be found in Northern Troms and Alta, in Kistrand, and in the Finnmark towns.

Table 1. Key to the parishes in Friis' data from 1861

1861 parish	Present municipalities	1861 parish	Present municipalities
Berg	Berg, Torsken	Skjervö	Skjervøy, Nordreisa, Kvænangen
Ibestad	Ibestad, Gratangen, Lavangen, Salangen	Tranö	Sørreisa, Dyrøy, Tranøy
Kistrand	Porsanger, Karasjok	Trondenæs	Trondenes, Bjarkøy, Skånland
Lyngen	Lyngen, Storfjord, Kåfjord		

We then consider their linguistic skills, one ethnic group at a time. Friis collected his data on a family basis, where a bilingual family was a "family where at least one person has the ability to speak a second language to a certain extent".[1] The true number of bilinguals was thus smaller than in Friis' data. Figure 2 shows the number of mono- and bilingual Sámi families in Finnmark and Troms.

In Troms, south of Lyngen, the Sámi families are all bilingual in Sámi and Norwegian. The number of monolingual Sámi families then grows as we move east. Only east of Hammerfest is the knowledge of Finnish more widespread than the knowledge of Norwegian. The Sámi families are bilingual in Norwegian in the areas where Norwegians and Sámis live together, and where the Norwegians outnumber the Sámis.

The multilingual patterns among Norwegians and Kvens deviate from the Sámi one. From Figures 3 and 4, we see that the Norwegians were bilingual in the Fiords and inland from Lyngen and eastwards, whereas in the area further south and in the towns of Finnmark they were predominantly monolingual.

Disregarding the town of Hammerfest, we find the largest percentage of bilingual Norwegians in the five largest Sámi parishes: Lyngen, Skjervøy, Nesseby, Alta and Kistrand. These are also the parishes where Norwegians were in the minority. Norwegian bilingualism and multilingualism is thus a result of local Sámi and Kven dominance, as was also seen in the quote from Eilert Sundt.

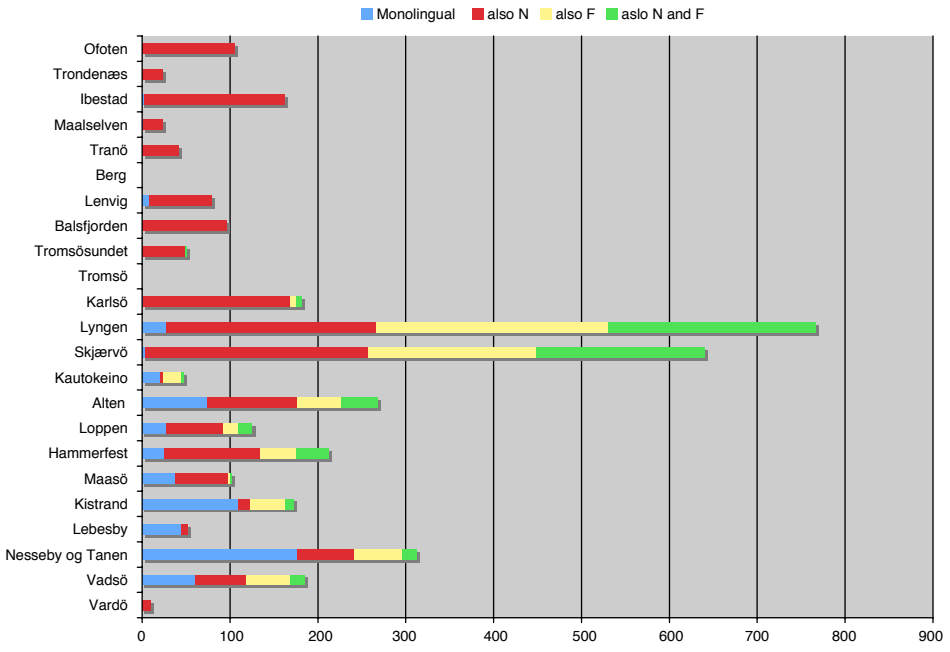

Figure 2. Bilingualism among Sámis, based upon Friis (1861).

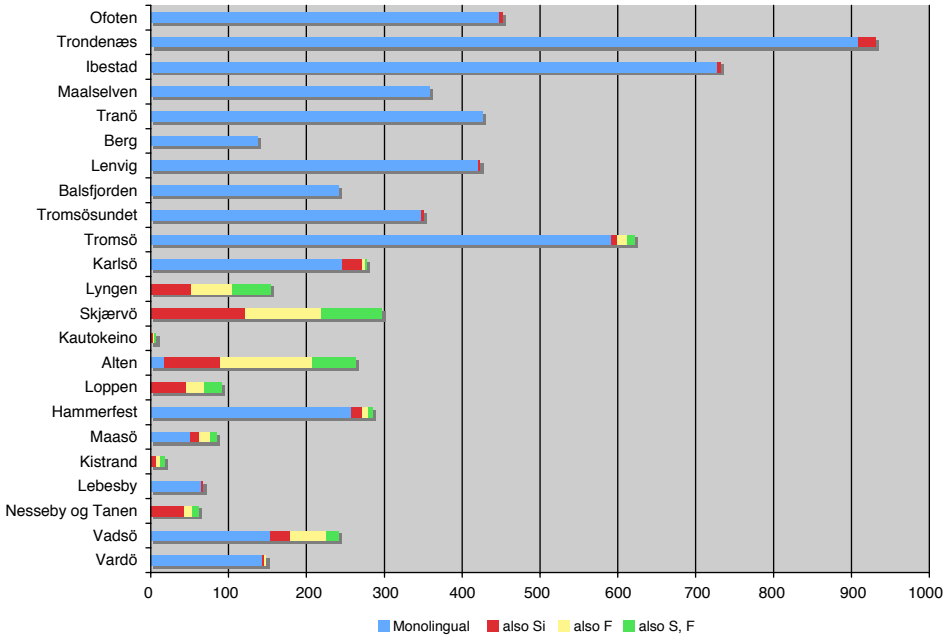

Figure 3. Bilingualism among Norwegians, based upon Friis (1861).

The Kvens were bilingual, to a much larger extent than the Norwegians (Figure 5). Only two parishes have some monolingual Kven families: Alta and Vadsø.

The five parishes with largest Finnish–Sámi bilingualism among the Kvens are also among the six largest Sámi parishes.

In this period, bilingualism may be read directly out of the demographical picture. The ethnic groups are bilingual only in a language spoken by a substantial part of the local population, and the status of the Norwegian language is in itself not enough to initiate Norwegian skills in parishes where Sámis or Kvens dominate. Also, in 1861 many Norwegians are bilingual, and just as the Finns and Kvens, they are bilingual in the parishes where they constitute a minority. The parishes with bilingual Norwegians are thus those where the Sámis dominate.

Modernisation and Assimilation

In the Nordic countries, the transition from subsistence to a money-based economy began in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the Sámi areas, the process started somewhat later. Together with this process, the Norwegian government initiated an assimilatory state consolidation policy. The process is thoroughly treated elsewhere (for some examples, see Dahl, 1957; Eriksen & Niemi, 1981; Minde, 2005; an in-depth study of a single municipality is Bjørklund, 1985), and apart from stating some milestones, shall not be repeated here, where the focus is on the linguistic consequences of the process.

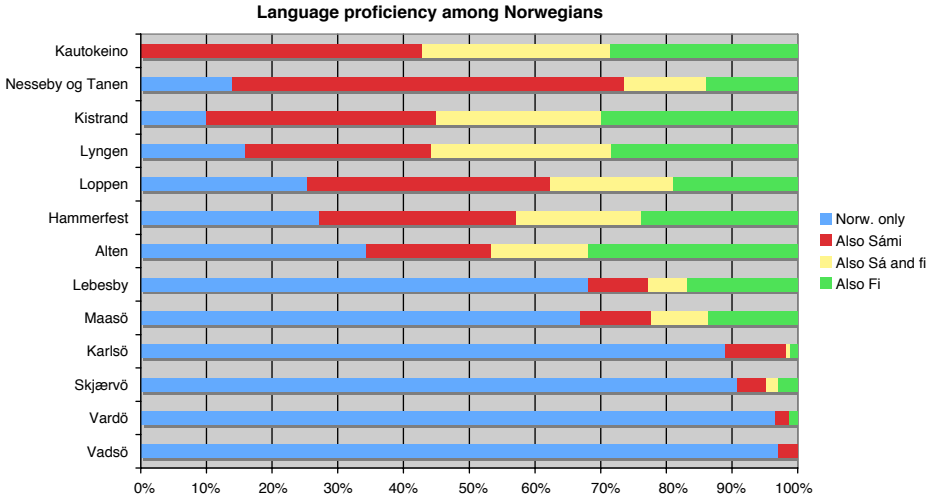

Figure 4. Language proficiency among Norwegians, in percent, based upon Friis (1861).

The Nordic State Consolidation Policy

In Norway, there was a profound change in policy towards the minorities around the turn of the century. Whereas the church wanted to spread the gospel, and saw that this was best done via the mother tongue, the government wanted to turn their citizens into Norwegian-speaking monolinguals. With the school curriculum from 1880, the use of Finnish and Sámi in school was banned, even as auxiliary languages, and the translation of textbooks from Norwegian into Sámi was terminated (NOU, 2000:3 p. 13). The use of Sámi and Finnish in school was not reintroduced until the 1970s for Sámi and the 1990s for Finnish. Even more important than textbooks was the policy of building boarding schools, a policy which started in 1905. Due to what was branded the "national problem", Troms and especially Finnmark got more than their share of the school budget; another example of the importance of the matter was that the first Norwegian radio broadcaster to be built outside Oslo was the one in Vadsø in the ethnically heterogeneous Eastern Finnmark, rather than in more densely populated areas in Southern Norway.

In addition to the state policy, the most important factor for language shift in Norway (as in neighbouring Finland) was the Second World War. In both countries, Sámis were evacuated at the end of the war. For many communities, this was the decisive factor causing language shift. The refugees stayed in southern Finland and Norway for a long time, often more than a year, and when they returned, many language communities kept up the habit of speaking the majority language.

Although the governmental policy was the same towards all Sámi parishes, the degree of Norwegianisation varied from parish to parish. The Census data from 1891 to 1930 gives data on ethnicity and dominating language ("hovedsprog") for Sámis and Kvens in Troms and Finnmark for the period 1891–1930 (NOS IX 1933: 7) (Figure 6).

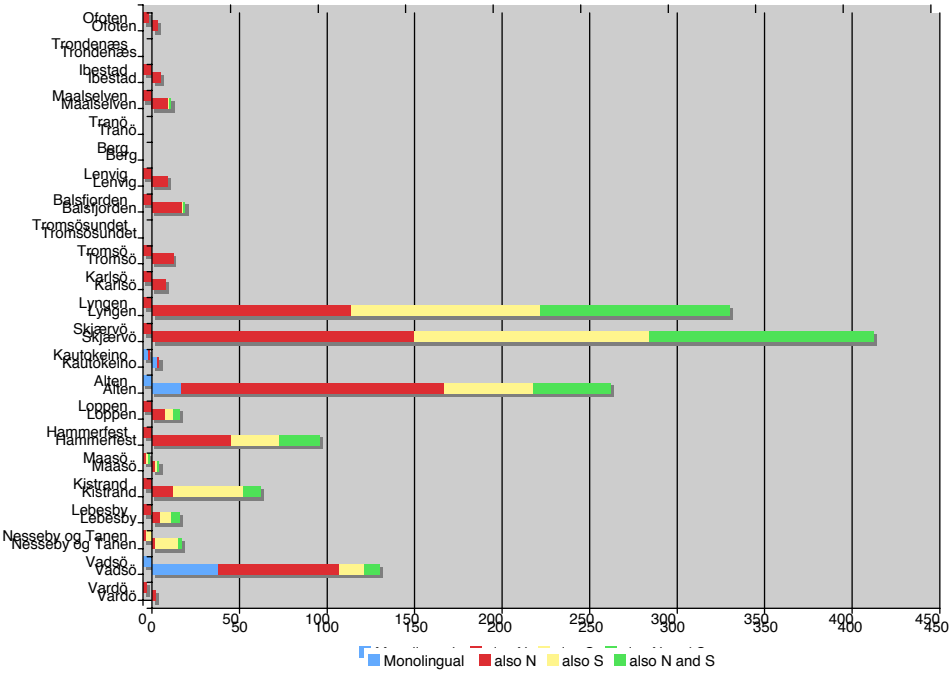

Figure 5. Bilingualism among Kvens, based upon Friis (1861).

The rise in the percentage for both Kvens and especially for Sámis from 1900 to 1910 is unexpected, and may indicate unreliability, but finding the Finnmark Sámis and the Troms Kvens at the opposite ends of the scale is as expected. The data show a quite stable situation for the first two decades, but then there is a clear drop in in-group language proficiency, approximately 10% for Sámis in Finnmark, 20% for Sámis in Troms and Kvens in Finnmark, and 35% for Kvens in Troms. The Sámi age pyramid of this period is quite stable, and presents a young population, with approximately 32% under 15

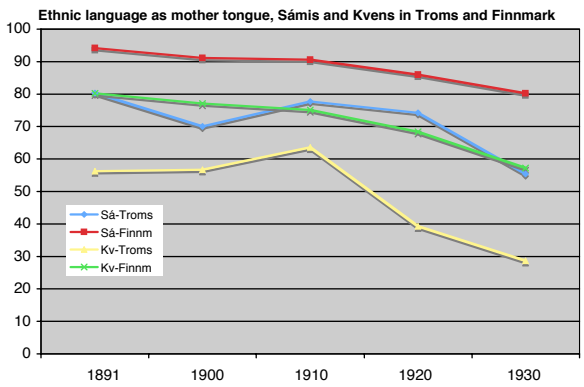

Figure 6. Ethnic language as percentage of ethnic group, Sámis and Kvens in the official census.

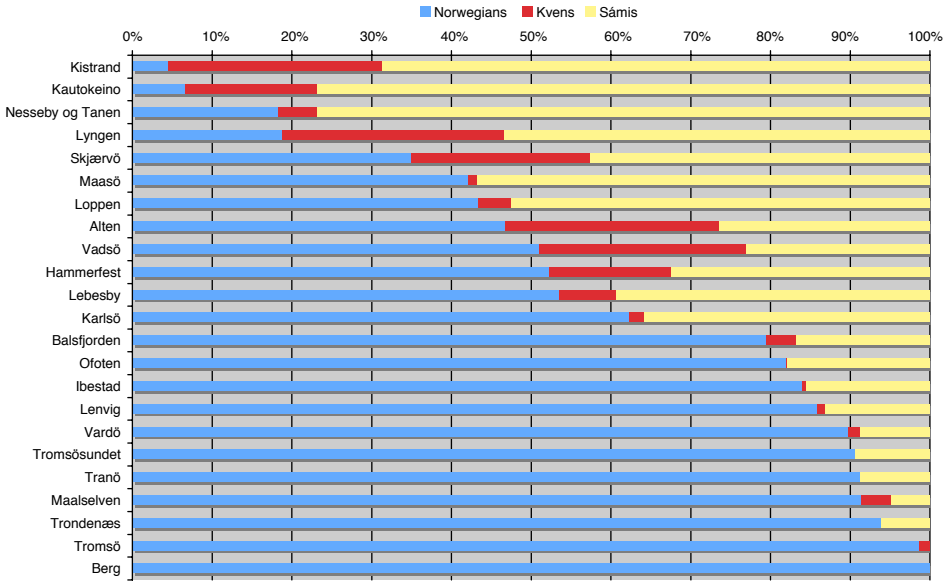

Figure 7. Ethnic division in Troms and Finnmark in 1855, in per cent, based upon Friis (1861).

years and 58% under 30. Thus, given that the change in language proficiency is found predominantly in the youngest age cohorts, a 20% and especially a 35% drop actually signals a large-scale language shift, with language death the long-term outcome. The 10% drop among Sámis in Finnmark is of a different nature, although also here the uneven distribution from municipality to municipality tells about a forthcoming language shift in marginal areas, compared with a still stable core.

The next scheduled census was called off due to the war, but there were questions on the Sámi language in the census in 1950 and for language and identity in 1970. The two post-war censuses are generally seen as somewhat unreliable, in that Sámi proficiency is probably under-reported (the respondents may have aspired at fulfilling the official policy of being Norwegian, and therefore not reported Sámi background or language skills), the percentage of respondents omitting to answer questions on ethnicity or language skills were also high. As an illustration, consider the fact that for the 1970 census in Finnmark, 8528 people reported Sámi as their first language, but only 7563 reported themselves as Sámis (cited from Aubert, 1978: 21ff). But for the same census, 13,968 had at least one Sámi-speaking grandparent (and would thus qualify for the Sámi electorate registry today), and 4496 did not know whether their grandparents spoke or had spoken Sámi. Also, 4774 did not want to answer those questions at all (of a total of 67,954 respondents). See Aubert (1978) for a critical discussion of the 1970 census.

With these caveats in mind, the existing material may still tell us something. First, let us anticipate a Finnmark without the assimilation policy. In 1855, there were 15,064 inhabitants in Finnmark, 5907 (or 39.2%) of whome were

classified as Sámis. If we extrapolate the same percentage to the situation 135 years later, the 67,954 inhabitants of Finnmark would have given 29,700 Sámis. For the core Sámi areas (Kautokeino, Kiberg, Tanen, Nesseby), the Sámi percentage was 73.9%; again, extrapolating would have given 9742 Sámis. Following Aubert, the maximum number of Sámis in the 1970 census would be the sum of the respondents with Sámi-speaking grandparents, the ones uncertain, the ones not wanting to answer, and the ones leaving the question unanswered. Calculating the number of Sámis in the same areas according to Aubert's inclusive count, the numbers are 7585 and 10,659 Sámis, respectively. Even with such a generous definition of Sámis, the core areas have lost 22% of their potential Sámis, and Finnmark as a whole has lost 60%.

Using extrapolation is of course a problematic method, and it also leaves open the question as to why the development has been so uneven within and outside the core Sámi areas. After all, in 1855, Aubert's Sámi core area, the "Lappish kernel", contained only 16% of the Sámis in Troms and Finnmark, and the rest of Finnmark only 29%.

When answering this we note that Aubert's core area overlaps with the officially bilingual Norwegian–North Sámi parishes today, i.e. Karasjok, Porsanger (i.e. Friis' Kistrand), Kautokeino, Nesseby, Tana, and in Troms Kåfjord (part of Friis' Lyngen). The relevant correspondence between today's formal and linguistic status and the demographic conditions in 1855 is the number of Norwegians. Today's officially bilingual municipalities correspond exactly to the group of parishes with less than 20% Norwegians in 1855. The relative size of the Sámi population within each parish is less relevant (cf. the difference between Lyngen and Maasö in Figure 7, where Maasö has more Sámis but fewer Norwegians), and also the absolute size of the Sámi population is irrelevant, as seen in Figure 1, where Skjærvö comes out as the largest Sámi parish.

Friis' data, combined with information on Norwegian and partly also Kven settlements dating hundreds of years back, tells us about a relatively stable bi- and multilingual situation, with monolingualism being the exception rather than the norm, for all three ethnic groups. This long-term stable situation was interrupted when the new assimilation policy set in after the turn of the century. It still takes almost a generation before the new linguistic situation hits the census data, but then it does so with a lost generation in the marginal areas, and with a somewhat more stable situation in the core areas. The delayed language shift in the inner core areas is clearly visible in the 1970 census, in which also the language proficiency of parents and grandparents was monitored.

As can be seen from Figure 8, the language situation is relatively stable in the inner core area (Karasjok, Kautokeino, Upper Tana). In the outer core area, and in Skånland in Southern Troms, the numbers for parents and grandparents are similar, whereas there is a drop to the census generation. For all other areas, the assimilation process started in the generation before the census generation.

Fewer Norwegians in the municipality (as was the case in the inner core areas) give rise to fewer situations where Norwegian is used, but it also gives fewer mixed marriages. Aubert's analysis of the 1970 census shows that, there in mixed marriages are more Sámi (9.7%) when they have a Sámi-speaking mother than when they have a Sámi-speaking father (4.9%). In both cases, the Sámi outcome of mixed marriages is marginal. Now, the number of mixed marriages reflected in the 1970 census is approximately 20% in the inner core area (Karasjok, Kautokeino, Upper Tana), approximately half of the marriages are mixed in the outer core area (Tana, Nesseby, Porsanger), and for the rest of Finnmark the Sámi population engage in mixed marriages in 80% of all marriages. When the outcome of mixed marriages is Norwegian-speaking children in 90% or more of the cases, it goes without saying that the number and distribution of mixed marriages is important, with an average language retention rate of 7% in mixed marriages. This means that the number of mixed marriages for the different areas gives rise to a 17% language shift in the inner core area, a 47% shift in the outer core area, and 75% language shift elsewhere.

A factor keeping the linguistic situation more stable is, as Aubert points out, the higher birth rate in the inland, compared to the coast, compensating somewhat for the Sámi language loss in the costal areas. It thus seems the language shift has been the result of a combination of several factors. When the explicit Norwegianisation policy in school and society has changed the linguistic scene so as to favour the Norwegian language, ethnically heterogeneous areas have gone over to Norwegian, especially as the result of ethnically mixed marriages.

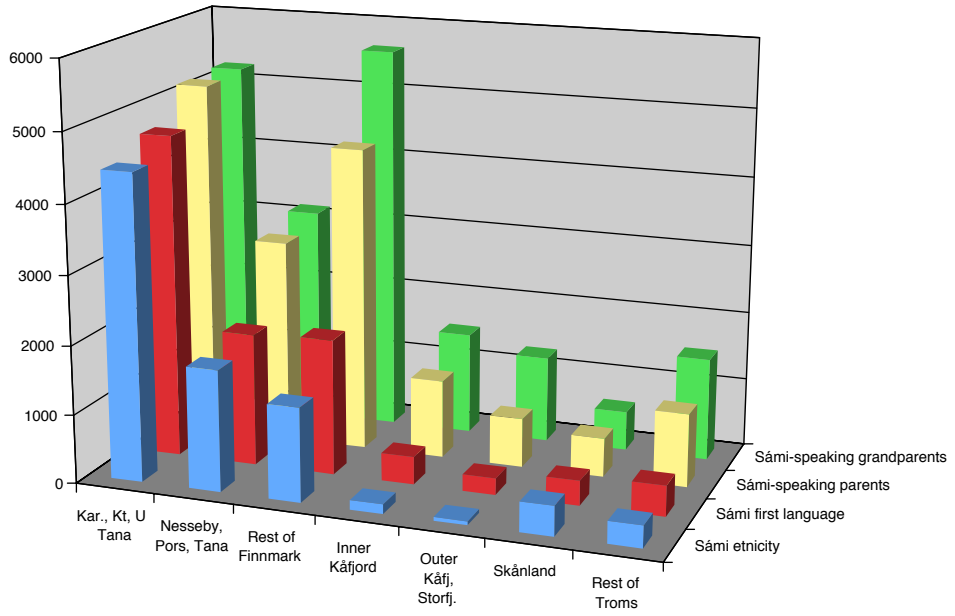

Figure 8. Etnicity and linguistic background, 1970 Census (Aubert 1978, table 8).

The Sámi revitalisation

The last two decades of the century witnessed an acceleration of the shift in the Norwegian policy towards the Sámis. The process is documented elsewhere (cf. e.g. Øzerk & Eira, 1996 for a study of the consequences for the policy on an institutional level), and it will not be treated in detail here.

During the 1980s and 1990s, several Sámi institutions were created, both high-profile institutions like the Sámi Parliament, theatre, court and television, but also basic ones such as an educational system from kindergarten to college. All the Sámi languages have a status today which differs drastically from the one 30 years ago. In Norway, the Sámi languages got official status in 1990. The number of pupils receiving instruction in Sámi as the first or the second language has been increasing steadily, as seen in Table 2.

Let us look at to what extent this is reflected among the speakers.

In his dissertation on Sámi revitalisation, Todal (2002) shows how the language shift witnessed in the coastal areas in earlier decades also had started reaching Karasjok in the 1970s. But during the 1980s, the language shift that had been in progress in Karasjok stopped. Today 80% of the children there, also the ones from bilingual families, speak Sámi. In addition, the remaining 20% learn Sámi as a second language. The Norwegians and assimilated Sámis in Karasjok welcome the bilingual education, or at least they do not protest against it. Whereas an increasing number of children in Karasjok in the mid 1970s grew up with Norwegian as their dominant language, the same persons speak Sámi to their own children today. Tables 3 and 4 contain data collected by Jon Todal, they show a typical pattern for a Karasjok family of four generations, in 1985 and 2000, from the viewpoint of the informant Berit, born in 1969. In 1985, the language shift is underway, but in 2000, it has been turned. Each cell in the table reads "row speaks with column".

To take an example, in 1985 Berit's mother speaks mostly Sámi to Berit, who answers in Norwegian only. In 2000, Berit and her sisters still speak Norwegian to each other, just as they did as children, but whereas in 1985 they spoke Sámi only to their grandparents, they now speak Sámi with Berit's daughter, and they speak more Sámi with their parents than before.

A further factor distinguishing Berit from her child is that whereas Berit's parent's generation attended a school where it was strictly forbidden to use Sámi, and Berit attended a school where Sámi played a marginal role (as a

Table 2. Sámi as first and second language, Norwegian schools (Todal 2002)

Area	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	97/98	99/00
Hedmark and Trøndelag	45	43	28	45	49	42	62	68
Nordland	84	58	52	53	57	51	81	103
Troms	83	131	125	175	164	179	234	364
Finnmark	948	1128	1278	1389	1409	1467	1719	1793
Elsewhere	18	0	10	18	19	19	20	19

Table 3. Language choice in Berit's family, 1985 (Todal 2002: 198).

Speaks with → ↓ speaker	Younger sister	Berit	Older sister	Berit's mother	Berit's father	Mom's mother	Mom's father	Father's father
Younger sister								
Berit								
Older sister								
Mother								
Father								
Mother's mother								
Mother's father								
Father's father								

Legend: Norwegian | Mostly Norw. | Mostly Sámi | Sámi

subject in an otherwise Norwegian curriculum), her child had the opportunity to attend primary school with Sámi the language of instruction. It is also quite likely that Berit sent her child to a Sámi class, as in the relevant period a growing number of children in the inner core areas did just that, cf. Figure 9.

Summing up

A century of assimilation policy in Finnmark has probably reduced the number of speakers of the Sámi language to a third of what would otherwise have been the case. The main effect of the change in policy during the last quarter of a century has been that the language shift in the core area has stopped, and to some extent it has even contributed to a reverse of the language shift.

Russia and the Soviet Union

In order to put the Norwegian policy in perspective, we now look at the language policy of the Soviet Union towards Uralic minorities in the twentieth century. The focus will be upon the language policy.

Table 4. Language choice in Berit's family, 2000 (Todal 2002: 201)

Speaks with → ↓ Speaker	Berit's child	younger sister	Berit	Older sister	Berit's mother	Berit's Father	Grand-parents	Grand-parents
Berit's child								
Younger sister								
Berit								
Older sister								
Berit's mother								
Berit's father								
Grandparents								
Grandparents								

Compared to the modernisation process in Norway, the Russian, or rather Soviet, modernisation began later, but was more abrupt, and implied a cultural, political and economical integration into the new Soviet system. Relevant to the present context is the difference in language policy between the Soviet Union and Norway, especially the differences with respect to the position of the language in the school system.

In a bird's eye perspective, the Soviet minority language policy may be divided in three phases (Kreindler, 1989; Trosterud, 1995, 1997):

1. 20 years with a focus on the national languages,
2. 20 years with balance between Russian and the national languages, and
3. 35 years with Russian dominance

In 1818, the People's commissariat for education stated that all nationalities were granted the right to mother tongue education (Lallukka, 1994, see also Lenin 1915). New borders were drawn in order to give nearly all linguistic minorities their own administrative area. The fact that the supporters of a pluralistic language policy have had Lenin on their side has been one of the major reasons why the assimilationists throughout the whole Soviet period have had much poorer working conditions than their western colleagues.

During a very short period, less than 15 years, all 140 languages of the Soviet Union got orthographies, primers and textbooks for mathematics and other primary school subjects in their mother tongue. Prior to that, the language planners had to decide where to draw the border between language and dialect, and what standard to base the literary language upon. This was an outstanding achievement. To this day no other language engineering project has achieved such results.

The next period witnessed a balancing of Russian and the indigenous languages. Starting in 1935, the Latin alphabet was exchanged for the Cyrillic alphabet, and in 1938, Russian was made a compulsory subject for all children.

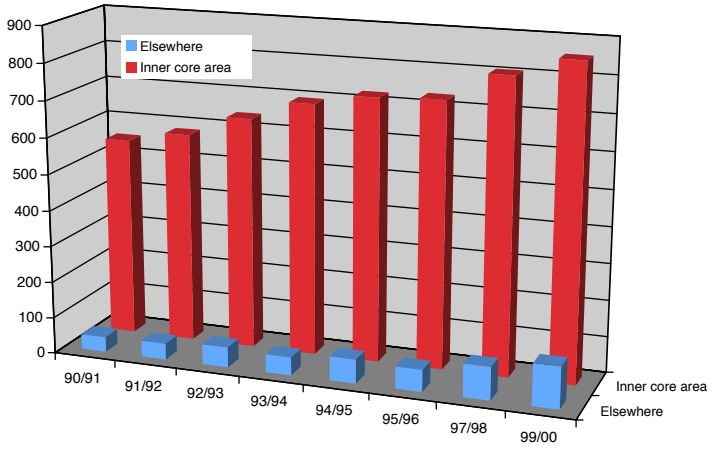

Figure 9. Children attending primary school with Sámi as first language.

After the Second World War, the work for developing native terms instead of using Russian loanwords was stopped, and neologisms were removed from the dictionaries. Instead, Russian loanwords were imported on a large scale in their original, Russian orthography, much like the import of English loanwords into many languages today. The school policy of Lenin and Stalin was largely kept, though: for the autonomous republics, there were 10-year schools with the national language as the language of instruction, and for the Northern peoples, the first 3 years of school should be given in the native language.

With the Khrushchev school laws of 1959, the Soviet Union changed its policy towards one of language assimilation. The use of Uralic and other minority languages as a language of instruction was reduced from 10 to 3 years. For the smaller languages, the native language was confined to a few mother tongue lessons a week.

This new policy can be seen in the drastic reduction in the number of books and brochures produced in Komi, Mari, Mordvin and Udmurt in the period (see Table 5). The table shows average number of copies/100 native speakers. From lagging behind Estonian by a factor of approximately 1:15 in 1959, the situation is drastically worsened in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods.

In order to get a bird's-eye view of the development, Figures 10 and 11 show the percentage of ethnic language speakers within each ethnic group, first for the major Uralic ASSR languages, and then for the Northern Uralic AO languages. The presentation in Figure 10 and all subsequent Soviet figures are based upon data of the official censuses, *Vsesojuznaja perepis' naselenija 1939 goda* (for 1939), *Itogi vjesojuznoj perepisi naselenija* (for 1959, 1970), *Chislennost' i sostav naselenija SSSR* (for 1979), and *Vestnik Statistiki* (for 1989).

All ASSR languages show a decline during the period, and only Mari actually loses less than a generation of speakers. This pattern fits well with the demographic situation in the Mari republic: most Maris live there, and they are in the majority in large parts of the republic, especially in the beginning of the period. The Karelians, at the other extreme, constitute only 11% of the population of their own republic, and the development of Karelian as a written language was disconnected after the war, giving way for Finnish on the symbolic level (ethnic republic newspaper) and Russian on the practical level.

Looking at the Northern Uralic languages, Nenets stands out as markedly different. This is due both to its size (with 34,000 ethnic Nenets' and 27,000 speakers it is close to twice as big as the Khantys), its geographical remoteness on the tundra, and its linguistic uniformity. Again, Khanty

Table 5. Number of books and brochures published in various languages (Lallukka, 1990: 193)

	Komi	Mari	Mordvin	Udmurt	Estonian	Non-Russ. lgs
1959	58	53	20	42	742	223
1970	30	41	12	21	1069	239
1979	24	24	11	26	1325	227

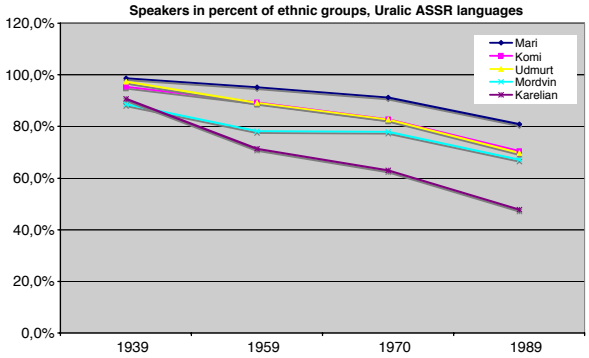

Figure 10. Uralic ASSR languages (Soviet Census).

provides a contrast, with linguistic differences between its dialects big enough to have called for several written languages.

At the other extreme comes Mansi, which is the smallest (under 5000) and also the southernmost language of the three. Their southern and south-western location is significant, they encountered the eastward Russian expansion earlier than their northern neighbours.

The data in Figures 12 and 13 give the number of members of the different Uralic ethnic groups in 1970, 1979 and 1989. Following the so-called Silver formula for estimating language roficiancy from Soviet Census data (Silver, 1975), I divide the members of the ethnic groups divided into four different categories: the Native Monolinguals (NM), speaking only the language of the ethnic group, the Unassimilated Bilinguals (UB), having Russian as a second language, the Assimilated Bilinguals (AB), having Russian as their first language, and the Assimilated Monolinguals (AM), who are monolingual Russian speakers. Figure 12 shows these categories for the Uralic languages of the Northern Autonomous areas.

To take an example, the last line for Nenets shows that in 1989, there were approximately 6000 monolingual Nenets speakers, 27,000 bilingual speakers

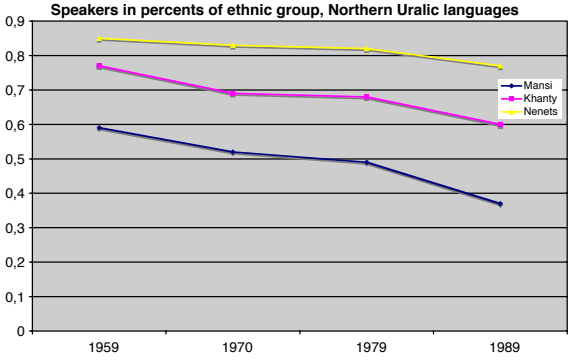

Figure 11. Northern Uralic languages (Soviet Census).

with Nenets as their first language, no native Nenets with Nenets as a second language, and 6500 Nenets who only spoke Russian.

For Khanty and Mansi, there is a decrease in the absolute number of native speakers. The drop in mother tongue speakers for Mansi from 1970 to 1989 shows that the vast majority of the children growing up in this period have not learned the ethnic language. For Nenets, language transmission from generation to generation is still functioning.

Looking at the relative distribution, all languages have had a fall both in the number of monolingual speakers and in the number of native speakers.

Figure 14 shows the corresponding number of Mordvin and Mari, two Uralic languages, official languages in their titular Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republics, situated between Moscow and the Ural Mountains.

Comparing Mordvin and Mari, we see that the total number of Mari speakers is constant. The group of monolingual Maris and Mordvins evidently consists of elderly speakers; for both languages, the group in question shrinks with approximately one cohort for each census. For Mordvin, the same holds for bilingual speakers as well, whereas the total number of Mari speakers is kept constant. In Mari, as in Mordvin, the fastest growing group is the group of Russian-language monolinguals.

The Soviet language policy was heavily linked to the concept of territory. After the October revolution, the internal borders were redrawn, in order to give each ethnic group its own administrative unit, in contrast to the earlier situation, where borders had been drawn disregarding ethnic distribution. Perhaps the ethnic group where this has been most difficult has been the Mordvin one. The Mordvins were the first to be affected by the Russian eastward expansion, many of them fled eastwards, and today the Mordvins are scattered around a very wide area, most of them living outside their ethnic

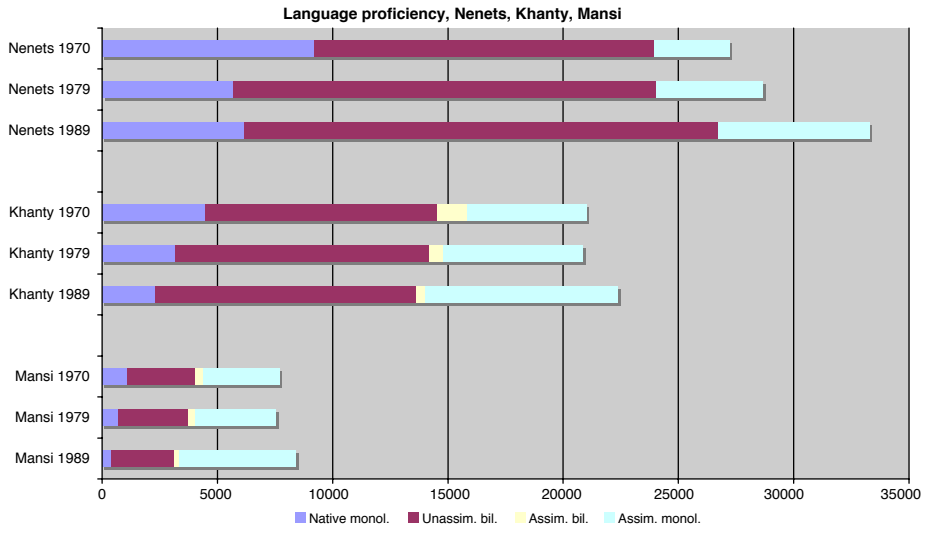

Figure 12. Language proficiency, 1970, 1979, 1989, Uralic Northern languages, Soviet census.

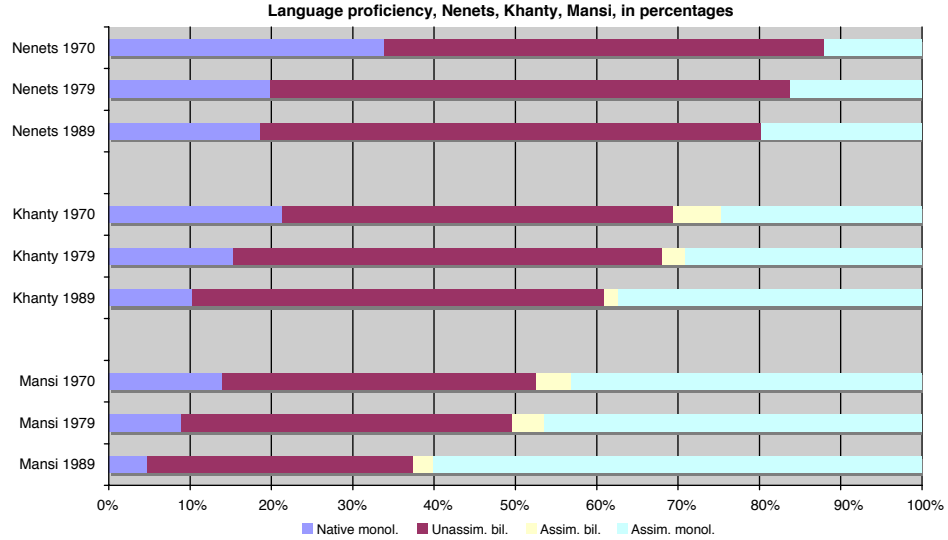

Figure 13. Language proficiency, 1970, 1979, 1989, Uralic Northern languages, Soviet census, in percent.

republic. As a rule, Soviet citizens were not entitled to mother-tongue education outside the republic (ASSR) of the language in question. Thus, children living outside of their "own" ASSR will have faced a school policy in line with the Norwegian one (Russian only), whereas children within their "own" ASSR have had either their whole primary education, or (after Khrushchev), the first years and thereafter some hours a week in their mother tongue.

Figure 15, with data for Mordvins from 1970, illustrates the effect of this distinction. The data distinguish between urban and rural areas, and for each

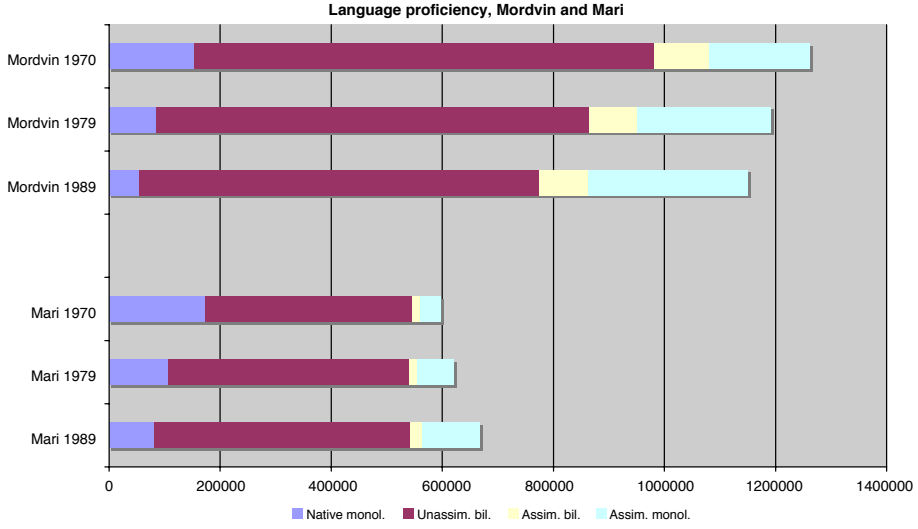

Figure 14. Language proficiency, 1970, 1979, 1989, Soviet census.

category, whereas the respondents live within, close to, or far from the Mordvin ASSR.

As can be seen from the figure, there is a difference between urban and rural areas, but in 1970, over 80% of the urban population within the ASSR still speak the national language. Even clearer is the outcome of the territorial nature of the Soviet language policy. For all categories, the ethnic language is in a stronger position inside the republic than outside it. Being within the republic even gives urban Mordvins a stronger position than rural dwellers outside the republic. The weakest category of speakers is "urban speaker elsewhere"; that is, speakers who are neither physically isolated from other language groups nor have institutional support for their own language.

From Khrushchev onwards, the Soviet language policy within the Russian federation was one of promoting Russian, and of marginalising the national languages. The role of the smaller languages was reduced to basic literacy, and folkloristic decoration. The Soviet policy was never as bad as the Scandinavian one, but it is clear that the original policy of Lenin and Stalin was traded for a policy where the long-term goal was to replace the minority languages with Russian. Combined with the political oppression during the whole Soviet era, this created an atmosphere where the national languages were seen as clearly inferior to Russian.

Comparing the Soviet and Nordic outcomes

Obviously, the twentieth century of the Soviet Union and the Nordic countries differ from each other in many ways. There are some common trends, though. In both cases, the century in question represented a century of

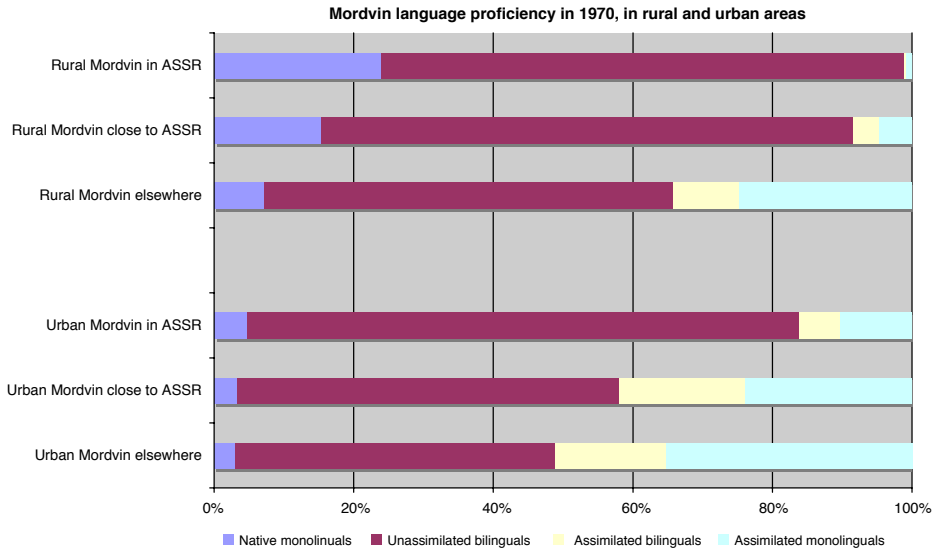

Figure 15. Mordvin language proficiency in 1970, in rural and urban areas (data from Soviet census, cited from Lallukka 1990: 203).

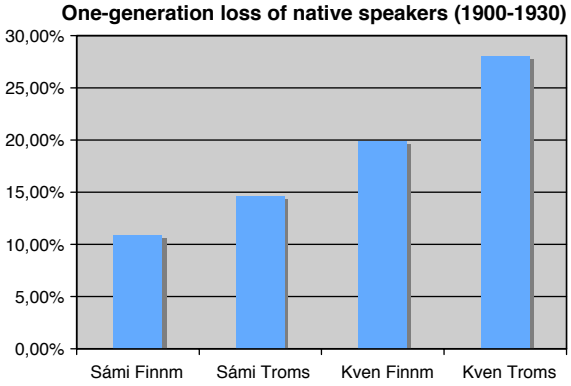

Figure 16. One-generation loss of native speakers (Sámi, Kven).

modernisation, especially for the northern ethnic minorities, who where transformed from a state of only partial contact with the dominant society, into integrated citizens of modern societies.

Due to a lower degree of centralisation in the nineteenth century, and then in the twentieth century to a more positive policy towards minority languages, assimilation has not been as drastic in the Soviet Union as in the Nordic countries. Given the somewhat unreliable post-war Norwegian censuses (especially with respect to ethnic affiliation), it is not possible to compare assimilation rates from the same period. But comparing the rate of native speaker loss over a generation (data from Figures 6, 11 and 12), gives the picture shown in figures 16 and 17.

From the figures we see that relative native speaker loss in the Soviet Union in the decades following 1959 (where russification was intensified) is comparable to the corresponding loss in Norway two generations earlier. The notable exception is Karelian, again due to its marginalised role in the Karelian ASSR.

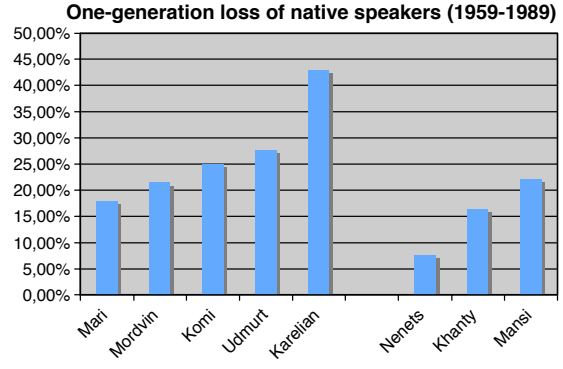

Figure 17. One-generation loss of native speakers (Uralic ASSR and AO languages).

Conclusion

The northern Uralic minority languages can look back at a long history under Slavic and Germanic rule. Despite this, they have survived, earlier due to a weak central power, more recently partly to a positive state policy towards minorities, and partly due to their remote location.

The decisive factor in language assimilation has been the combination of a deliberate language policy, with majority-language boarding schools, assimilatory curricula, on the one hand, and a contact with the majority-speaking group, first of all via inter-ethnic marriages, but also in contact with official bodies of societies. Under such circumstances language shift reduces the ethnic group substantially during three generations. Now, as witnessed in Norway, a change in official policy, and above all, in the attitudes on the speakers, may still reverse an ongoing language shift. Whether the same will happen for the Uralic minorities in Russia, and whether the revitalisation will continue in Norway, is still too early to tell.

Note

[1] Daa (1886) points out that by assuming an average number of five members per household, the resulting sums are very close to the 1855 census.

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