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The diversity of Saami languages in the Nordic countries

The Saami branch of the Uralic family consists of a continuum of about ten languages that stretch from Central Scandinavia to the Kola Peninsula. About half of them are being transmitted to new generations under the ever-growing influence of four majority languages – Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Russian.

Today, virtually all speakers of Saami languages are bilingual in their respective state languages. The inescapable bilingualism and the severe minority position have resulted in remarkable interference and changes on all levels of all languages. During the past decades, one of the central creeds of the Saami national awakening has been the idea of the linguistic and cultural unity of “one people, whose fellowship must not be divided by state boundaries”, but from a linguistic point of view, this protectionism is relevant mainly to the North Saami.

North Saami is spoken by about 20,000 speakers or 90 per cent of the speakers of the Saami languages. North Saami language activist in Norway, Sweden and Finland wish to maintain the language in its pure and classical form to avoid the genuine danger of the state borders dividing the language community. Despite conscious efforts to prevent the dispersal, North Saami speakers face problems when communicating across the state borders that have become new dialect borders.

While most Saami language communities such as those of Skolt Saami and South Saami develop in internally uniform directions – becoming increasingly isomorphic with Finnish and Scandinavian, respectively – the situation of North Saami is the most extraordinary: the majority languages are pulling the language in two or three opposite directions. On the other hand, as the other Saami language communities are under the pressure of only one or two similar majority languages, they are constantly diverging from each other more than ever before.

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