

“Welcome to our Norway”: A sociolinguistic perspective on contemporary Sáminess

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In the eyes of the outside world, the language situation of Norway may seem like the epitome of linguistic tolerance and democracy: Local dialects enjoy relatively high prestige at all levels of society, and the co-existence of two official written standards for Norwegian is widely known. However, Norway has a lesser-known history of more than hundred years of severe ethnic and linguistic assimilation of its Finno-Ugric minorities, Sámi and Kven, during the 19th and the 20th centuries. While variation within both spoken and written Norwegian gradually found significant macro level support in this period, a strict policy of “fornorskning”, which literally means Norwegianisation, paved way for a comprehensive language shift in traditionally multilingual areas in Northern Norway: Sámi and Kven were supposed to become Norwegians by leaving their cultures and languages behind once and for all. In contrast, these minorities are today entitled to special protection and rights, first and foremost as a result of the ethnic renaissance after World War II, and the revitalisation discourse encourages Sámi and Kven minority members to take pride in their cultural heritage and strengthen the minority languages.

This talk aims at challenging the master narrative of the Norwegian “sociolinguistic paradise” by drawing attention to areas, speakers and research questions that traditionally have been excluded from the otherwise massive production of knowledge concerning language variation in Norway. It presents data from two periods of fieldwork on the outskirts of the nation-state, i.e. a small, northern Coastal Sámi community characterised by the conflict between consequences of former nationalism and assimilation on the one hand, and tendencies of revitalisation and multilingualism on the other.

The first part of the presentation focuses on empirical evidence from in-depth interviews that shows how the seemingly straightforward historical linearity of ‘first assimilation, then emancipation’ becomes broken up in the study of the sociolinguistic effects of these processes. More specifically, history continues to exert a considerable degree of influence at the micro level. This is largely due to the fact that minority speakers, even today, have to deal with the consequences of assimilation on a daily basis. In that sense, assimilation and emancipation still live side by side in the community, as both types of policies and discourses are reflected in diverging attitudes and behaviours of community members belonging to different generations.

Against this backdrop, the last part of the talk examines socially meaningful variation in spoken Norwegian among teenagers in the same community. Differences found within the broad ethnic category Sámi illustrate how important it is to adopt a nuanced notion of ethnicity, and the analysis uncovers variation along other meaningful dimensions as well, especially insofar as gender is concerned. More generally, the findings presented call out for expanding the research on different aspects of sociolinguistic variation in the traditional language contact areas of Norway, not the least on the background of the ideological transition from stigma to pride concerning Sáminess.