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### **Taking Care of the Ancestral Language: The Language Revitalisation of Non-Status Sámi in Finnish Sápmi**

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#### **Abstract**

Non-status Sámi are defined as a group of people who are of Sámi descent, but they do not have official Sámi status. The term 'non-status' means that they lack the official status of Sámi people because they do not fulfill the criteria of Sáminess, as defined by the Finnish law of the Sámi Parliament, and thus do not belong to the electoral register of the Sámi Parliament. Some of the Non-status Sámi have revitalised the Sámi language and started to use it actively; this was the target group of this study. In this study, ten Non-status Sámi's narratives were obtained through interviews. The Sámi-speaking Non-status Sámi were divided into two types according to how they locate themselves in Sámi society: (1) conscious Non-status Sámi; and (2) integrative Non-Status Sámi. According to the findings, Sámi-speaking Non-status Sámi identities and locations within the Sámi society are diverse. The study contributes to the discussion of decolonisation a new perspective from Indigenous people who have consciously started to revitalise Indigenous language and culture. Furthermore, the study shows the multidimensional nature of Indigenous identity and sheds light on marginalities in Indigenous communities.

#### **Introduction**

The Sámi are the only Indigenous people within the area of the European Union. There are many ways of defining the concept of Indigenous people. For example, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (1989), Indigenous peoples are:

peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

The Sámi are recognised as an Indigenous people in the Constitution of Finland, and as Indigenous people they are also allowed to develop their language and culture (Keskitalo, Uusiautti and Määttä 2012; Sarivaara, Uusiautti and Määttä 2013). The Sámi's status as Indigenous people is based on their unique worldview, their own history, livelihoods and language. Sápmi, the region inhabited by the Sámi, expands from Central Norway and Sweden over the northern part of Finland to the Kola Peninsula in Russia and is therefore located in four countries.

In Finland, the definition of a Sámi is mainly based on the knowledge of Sámi language. According to the definition, a Sámi is a person who considers himself or herself a Sámi, provided that this person has learnt Sámi as his or her first language or has at least one parent or grandparent whose first language is Sámi (Samidiggi 2008). According to official statistics, there are about 9900 Status Sámi people in Finland (Sámi Parliament 2011). Sámi languages are the closest cognate languages of Finno-Ugric languages (such as Finnish, Hungarian and Estonian). Of the nine Sámi languages, three are spoken in Finland: North Sámi, Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi. Furthermore, there are dialects that vary by region. North Sámi is the biggest language group and approximately 20,000 people speak it in Finland, Norway and Sweden, of whom 2000 live in Finland. About 300 people speak Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi in Finland. According to official statistics, there are approximately 1800 Sámi language speakers in Finland (Seurujärvi-Kari 2012). However, it has been argued that the number of Sámi speakers is larger than official statistics show (Rasmussen 2007). The official statistics are based on voluntary reports of one's native language. Presumably, the number of Sámi speakers is more than 1800 people because many speakers may not have reported their native language, for some reason or another, even when Sámi is their first language. Moreover, the Sámi question has been in public debate in Finland recently as the definition of Sáminess has aroused wide public discussion.

Discussion about Sáminess, and especially how a Sámi should be defined, began in Finland in the 1990s after a Bill for a Sámi Act was presented to Finnish Parliament. This was a period when various pieces of legislation concerning the Sámi were introduced (Pääkkönen 2008). The 1990s was an important time for enhancing Sámi rights, culminating in the question of who can and who cannot be accepted as Sámi. As a result of assimilation, some Sámi people have lost their language. The language shift has diminished the possibility of becoming officially accepted as Sámi and thus, being a member of the Sámi electoral register. Consequently, the reforms taking place in the 1990s initiated the struggle for acceptance of Sámi identity.

In this study, the term 'Sámi-speaking community' means a group of Sámi-speaking people which consists mostly of Sámi, but also of non-Sámi people who know the Sámi language. The term 'Sámi community' describes the macro level, which contains Sámi media, as well as other institutions such as schools and political bodies (Todal 2002). Overall, Indigenous identity appears to be a very multidimensional concept (Sarivaara, Uusiautti and Määttä 2013). On the other hand, identity is closely connected to language. As a matter of fact, language is considered the most important feature of a culture: the role of language is important in defining one's cultural identity (Ahlers 1999; King 2009; Schecter and Bayley 1997). Therefore, when speaking an Indigenous language, it is highly likely the speakers *think* in ways that are consistent with their Indigenous language. Ways of thinking are embedded in language, and as such, it is essential for researchers to understand how language is structured and used within the community (Borden 2012).

In this article, we will first outline the history of assimilation of the Sámi in Finland. Then, as our main interest is in language shift, we will illustrate the phenomenon among the Sámi and describe how the group of Non-status Sámi (stáhtuskeahtes sápmelaččat in Sámi) emerged. Thus, the question of language shift is closely connected to the question of the official definition of Sámi. We will introduce the process of language revitalisation among the group of Non-status Sámi, the reasons behind this revitalisation, and the position of the group within the Sámi community. In

conclusion, we will discuss the importance of the concept of Non-status Sámi for the process of decolonisation and raising Indigenous consciousness at a more general level.

## **Colonisation and language shift among the Sámi**

### *The Sámi and their assimilation in Finland*

An intensive process of colonisation started hundreds of years ago in the region where the Sámi live in Finland. According to Rauna Kuokkanen (2006), colonisation is based on an ideology and types of action that were created during the Renaissance; it entails making use of other peoples' lands and resources and enhancing settlement in their territory. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has written about the colonisation of Indigenous peoples and the forms it assumes today. As early as the 1600s, Sámi began to give up their traditional livelihoods and were turned into residents with small homesteads. This also changed their way of life and language: they began to speak the Finnish language to their children. As a result, some of the Sámi have gradually become assimilated into the Finnish community and the self-determination of the Sámi's own polity, the Sámi village system, or *siida*, disappeared (Lehtola 2002). Thus, colonisation has also entailed a cultural shift: the Sámi language has been replaced by the Finnish language, and, for example, the Christian Church has displaced the traditional cultural and spiritual ceremonies of the Sámi. This is also referred to as 'stealing' people's thoughts (see Balto 2008; Lehtola 1997; Kuokkanen 2006).

The idea of otherness lies behind colonialism's justification for the subordination of Indigenous peoples: otherness has determined the relations between Indigenous peoples and nations up until the present day. The aim of colonialism was also to govern the region in order to make economic use of the area by using both its nature and workforce. Furthermore, colonialism causes Indigenous peoples' social inferiority in relation to the dominant population (Keskitalo, Määttä and Uusiautti 2011). The counter process to colonialism is decolonisation, which is closely connected with the concept of self-determination (Dehyle and Swisher 1997; Kuokkanen 2006). Decolonisation refers to a long-term process that involves tearing down the administrative, cultural, linguistic and psychological colonialist power (Smith 1999).

The position of the Sámi was written into the Finnish Constitution in 1995. Pursuant to it, the Sámi have, as an Indigenous people, the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture and their traditional sources of livelihood. Since 1996, the Sámi have, according to the Constitution, also had linguistic and cultural self-government in the Sámi region (Pääkkönen 2008). But the phenomenon is not that simple. In the next section, we will describe the language shift and the emergence of the group called Non-status Sámi to highlight the effects of assimilation of Sámi in Finland.

### *Language shift among the Sámi*

I've often said that I have Inari Sámi ancestors but I'm not in the Sámi electoral register. My answer and my feelings about this question change from day to day (Research partner 5).

In this article, we introduce and define a group of people within Sámi society who were previously invisible in public. The members of this group are not included in the official statistics and they lack official status as Sámi because they do not fulfill the criteria of Sáminess. Pursuant to Finnish law in the Sámi Parliament, a person is considered a Sámi if he or she considers himself or herself a Sámi and if (1) the person himself, or at

least one parent or grandparent, has learned Sámi as their first language; or (2) the person is a descendant of someone who has been registered as a Fell, Forest or Fishing Sámi in the land, taxation or census register; or (3) at least one of his or her parents has, or could have been, registered as entitled to vote in the elections of the Sámi Delegation or the Sámi Parliament (Act on Sámi Parliament 1995; adopted on 17 July 1995). The website of the Finnish Sámi Parliament states that according to law, a Sámi is a person who considers himself or herself a Sámi provided that the person, or at least one of his or her parents or grandparents, has learned Sámi as the first language (Finnish Sámi Parliament 2008).

Furthermore, these people are regularly not accepted as Sámi in social contexts, and are considered Finns. Thus, they live between two realities: according to the official Sámi definition, they are not Sámi, but neither do they consider themselves purely Finns. In other words, their identities resemble a mixed heritage. However, this group is special in one respect: they have managed to reclaim their ancestral language, the Sámi language. In this article, the concepts 'language revitalisation' and 'language revival' are used side by side, along with the expression 'to reclaim the language', to refer to the process of learning and beginning to re-use a lost language of one's ancestors.

In linguistic sociology, language shift is often described by the phases A/a (minority language) and B/b (dominant language) created by Haugen (1953). The model illustrates the phases of language shift and bilingualism. The size of the letter tells how well the person masters the language: the capital letter shows a solid knowledge of the language, while the small letter symbolises lesser skills. In the model, the process both starts from and results in monolingualism. As a model, it takes this form: A – Ab – AB – aB – B.

However, the linguistic sociologists Leena Huss and Anna-Riitta Lindgren (2007) point out that, for example, in the context of the North Calotte, both the starting point and the result of language shift are more complex than in the model developed by Haugen. Indeed, the process may start from one type of multilingualism and result, after a language shift, in a different type of multilingualism. Language shift and language loss among Indigenous peoples is a major threat to keeping languages alive. However, study of endangered languages did not start until the beginning of the 1990s. Language shift is always connected to power asymmetries between minority and majority languages, and also to the prestige of Indigenous languages (Aikio-Puoskari 2001; Fishman 1971, 1991; Grenoble and Whaley 2006; Hale 1998; Hinton and Hale 2001; Hyltenstam et al. 1999; Krauss 1992; Olthuis 2003).

## **Method**

This study focused on a group of people from Sámi society who are invisible in public because they have revitalised the Sámi language even though it has not been spoken in their families for generations. They are not Sámi according to legislation, and the term Non-status Sámi is used to illustrate their marginal position as a group in Sámi society. The term is derived from the international concept of Non-status Indian (Magnet et al. 2005).

When it comes to the linguistic background of the research participants (we prefer calling them research partners, see Sarivaara 2012), none have learned Sámi as their first language and most have not been in contact with Sámi-speaking people in their

childhood. They have learned Finnish as their first language at home, and most have not learned Sámi until adulthood, outside the home. In the next section, we will describe the way people belonging to this group have revitalised their ancestral language. The concept has been studied by describing: (1) why the group of Non-status Sámi want to revive the language of their ancestors; (2) how they use Sámi today; and (3) what the relation of Non-status Sámi is with Sáminess in Sámi society.

The data for this study is comprised of interviews with ten people conducted in 2008–2009 in Finland. The interviewees were selected according to the three criteria used as a basis for the definition of Non-status Sámi: they must know the Sámi language, they must have oral family knowledge about having Sámi ancestors, and they must not be considered Sámi under the official definition of Sáminess—that is, they must not be entitled to vote in the elections of the Sámi Parliament. In this study, these people were considered researcher partners because they were not passive informants, but rather, worked, to some extent, together with the researchers. In this way, the participants of the study benefit from studying each other.

Recruiting participants for this study was challenging, partly because the study deals with people's sense of belonging. The ambiguous situation of the Non-status Sámi, existing between two nations and cultures, may result in an identity that is especially vulnerable and complex. Furthermore, the subject seems to be taboo and unspoken, both at the level of individuals and society. Although the Non-status Sámi have a sense of being part of Sámi society, they prefer to hide rather than show their Sámi identity. The fact that they have no official status in the Sámi community creates challenges for the revitalisation of language and culture (Researcher's Diary 2009). Non-status Sámi are in a marginal position in the Sámi community. The aim of this study is to give a voice to this silent, and to some extent oppressed, group.

The project engages a qualitative research methodology with a narrative approach (Polkinghorne 1988; Riessman 1993). Narrative research can be defined as research that utilises or analyses data that is collected via narratives (e.g. biographies) or other such ways (e.g. anthropologists' observational narratives and interviews). Thus, a narrative can be either a research object or a means to study a phenomenon (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998). Narrative research does not focus on objective and generalised facts, but rather on local, personal and subjective information; this is considered a strength of narrative research because informants' voices can be heard authentically (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Narratives can also be used when analysing the reasons for actions (see Rubin and Rubin 1995).

The study was done in cooperation with the research partners so that there was dialogue and exchange between the researcher and the participants: understanding and interpretation formed a continuous process, a hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1979). The study also aimed at empowerment through the researcher starting a process of change and encouraging the participants to talk about and define their Sámi identity.

Naturally, there are some issues concerning reliability that have to be discussed. The original study on which this article is based was conducted by Dr. Sarivaara, a Non-status Sámi woman who identifies as a Sámi herself. How much did her position and presupposition affect the data and the results? This problem was addressed by using her life history as a means to conceptualise the phenomenon of revitalising the Sámi language. On the other hand, her knowledge and the familiarity with the culture and language can be considered crucial not only when seeking access to the field

(addressing people who belong to the target group) but also when interpreting the data and results. Without insight into the process, such interpretations might be difficult or erroneous, or even impossible, to make. On the other hand, this article was produced through research co-operation with Dr. Uusiautti who has been working with the Sámi's educational issues and on educational research in general at the University of Lapland. The authors' collaboration provided an opportunity to interpret and evaluate the results from multiple perspectives.

## Results

Language shift accompanied by stigmatisation of the Indigenous language is an effective way of colonising an Indigenous people (Hirvonen 1999; Huss 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). In this section, we will introduce the processes of revitalising an Indigenous language, taking back the culture and identity, and how this process was perceived by the Non-status Sámi. This section is divided in three sub-sections answering the questions of (1) why the group of Non-status Sámi wanted to revive the language of their ancestors; (2) how they use the Sámi language today; and (3) what is the relation of Non-status Sámi with Sáminess in Sámi society.

### *Why language revitalisation?*

What are the reasons behind the desire of Non-status Sámi to learn the Sámi language? Why did they start to study Sámi? In his study, Jon Todal (2002) mentions three motivations for learning a language: instrumental, integrative and continuity. Instrumental motivation means that one wants to learn the language because, for example, it brings economic benefits. Integrative motivation means that one has a sense of belonging to a linguistic group and wants to attain a deeper understanding of the culture of that group. For example, a Finn who has married a Sámi may want to learn Sámi in order to be able to integrate better within the Sámi community. Continuity motivation means that one wants to learn the language in order to establish a connection with one's history and strengthen one's identity.

In the interviews, two main motivations for learning Sámi were found: continuity motivation, which emphasises awareness of Sámi ancestors, and integrative motivation. The motivations are interrelated, as people have had many reasons for starting to study the Sámi language. Most of the research partners mentioned that, at first, the knowledge of having Sámi ancestors motivated them to learn Sámi. This motivation refers to continuity: one wants to create a link to one's history through learning the language. The following are examples of how continuity motivation was expressed in interviews:

It did not just occur all of a sudden to me that I would want to study Sámi; this issue of being Sámi and my own history had bothered me for a long time (Research Partner 4).

I have always been interested in the Sámi language and culture. And, as I knew that I had some Sámi blood in me, I figured that maybe I should start studying Sámi (Research Partner 8).

However, four research partners said that their decision to study Sámi was influenced by their environment, for example, a Sámi-speaking partner and/or Sámi-speaking friends:

I ended up studying Sámi culture as my major subject. That meant that I had to take Sámi as a subject (Research Partner 12).

This woman explained her motivation to learn Sámi, which turned out to be both integrative and instrumental:

I moved to a small Sámi-speaking village, and, as I was unemployed, I went to study Sámi at Inari Folk High School, and now that I'm studying to become a teacher, I've also studied Sámi at the University of Oulu (Research Partner 6).

Some Non-status Sámi have learned the Sámi language early on in life, as they have grown up in a Sámi environment and been supported by their parents. The parents have decided that their children should learn Sámi. One woman talked about studying Sámi as a way of demonstrating what an active role the mother had in the family, but also how she tried to promote Sámi in her own environment:

I've learned Sámi out in the village, although you don't hear it too much there, but we had this club during our free time. There we played ... games and sang songs. So I knew that kind of things in Sámi before I started school. I don't know exactly how much I understood, but I guess quite a lot. Then I went to the pre-school class, the Sámi one. And my mother tried to talk the other parents, too, into putting their children into the Sámi class, but no-one did that. In the elementary school, I studied all the subjects in Sámi, I guess I had just physical education in Finnish. Everything else was in Sámi (Research Partner 10).

A negative identity and stigmatisation have prevented Sámi from using and appreciating their own language. For example, the Sámi who went to boarding schools had to suffer for being Sámi; they have had to deny and feel ashamed about their Sámi background (Rasmus 2008). As Rasmus (2008: 10) puts it: 'A majority of the Finnish Sámi who were born after World War II have had to go to boarding schools'. The Non-status Sámi have not experienced the contempt of the dominant society because of their ethnic background as their families had lost the Sami language several generations ago. Thus, the Non-status Sámi do not carry the same kind of mental burden as the Sámi who had to go to boarding schools. Therefore, the Non-status Sámi's approach to the Sámi language is not connected to negative attitudes, and it may therefore be easier for them than for other Sámi to start learning the language.

One purpose of this study was to analyse whether Non-status Sámi had intentionally decided to revitalise their ancestors' language or whether they had first learned the language and, only after that, begun to find out whether there were Sámi ancestors in their families. The results showed that, for most of the research partners, knowledge about having Sámi ancestors was the primary reason for studying Sámi. In the research material, two groups stand out with differing ideas about Sámi identity: *integrating* Non-status Sámi and *conscious* Non-status Sámi.

The first group has integrated into the Sámi community through language. Their Sámi roots have inspired them to start Sámi language studies. After the initial boost, their language studies and usage have been motivated by living in the Sámi community. On the other hand, the second group, the conscious Non-status Sámi, consider themselves to be Sámi through their Sámi roots by identifying with the Sámi community. For them, the Sámi language represents a cultural continuity. They feel that the language connects them to the chain of generations.

*Using the Sámi language*

All research partners knew Sámi quite well or very well. Table 1 illustrates how the participants of the study use Sámi in different contexts and spheres of life. Table 1 comprises the most common and central contact networks of a person, examining the use of Sámi within the family, at work and with friends.

**Table 1. The use of languages in various areas of life**

Research partner	At work	With Sámi-speaking friends	With children and grandchildren	With the Sámi-speaking life companion
Male	Sámi	Sámi	Sámi	Sámi
Male	Finnish Sámi	Finnish Sámi	Finnish	-
Female	Sámi Norwegian	Sámi	Finnish	-
Male	Finnish Sámi	Sámi	Sámi	Sámi
Female	Finnish Sámi	Finnish	Finnish Sámi	-
Female	Finnish	Finnish	Sámi	Finnish
Male	-	Finnish Sámi	-	-
Male	Sámi	Sámi	-	-
Female	Sámi	Sámi	Sámi	-
Female	-	Sámi Finnish	-	-

Table 1 shows the use of language both in private and working life. All the participants in the study used Sámi at work all the time or to some extent. The fact that they speak Sámi in the private sphere with their friends and their Sámi-speaking partners indicates that their use of Sámi is conscious and that the Sámi-speaking community is mostly positive, open and inclusive. According to the results, the Non-status Sámi were accepted as part of the Sámi-speaking community.

It is noteworthy that many of the research partners choose to teach the Sámi language to their children and grandchildren. According to the interviews, they did so in order to guarantee their children a better knowledge of the Sámi language and a stronger Sámi identity than they have had. The Non-status Sámi had really revitalised Sámi in their own lives, both in public and in private.

#### *The position of the Non-status Sámi in Sámi society*

Sámi society consists of a variety of members who form specific groups based on their cultural identity, language and official status. Sámi society comprises all the Sámi who fulfill the criteria of the official definition of a Sámi, whether they know or do not know the Sámi language. Naturally, the dominant population—which in the case of Finland means the Finns—who are non-Sámi and do not know the Sámi language, do not belong to the Sámi society. The group of Non-status Sámi thus appears as a new separate group from the Sámi and the dominant population. However, the group is located within Sámi society because they speak Sámi and also because most of them are engaged with Sámi society through their work or voluntary activities.

Sámi ancestry dates back far in the past and the ‘Finnishisation’ of families is the reason why Non-status Sámi do not fit into the present definition of a Sámi. They are individual people who have a sense of being Sámi and who have, to some extent, become integrated into Sámi society through their work, family, and the Sámi language.

I must say I’m in a way very careful, I’ve not found out how much [Sámi blood] I have in me. [...] (Research Partner 11).

As this quote demonstrates, some of the Non-status Sámi feel ambivalent about their sense of belonging in the Sámi community because they are afraid of the bad reputation of being a half-breed Sámi—or less. Awareness of the prevailing, demonised way of talking about ethnic groups, people and cultures may become the reason why individual people do not want to be categorised into a demonised group (Rastas 2007; Suurpää 2002). In relation to identity, Non-status Sámi choose the strategy of keeping quiet about their Sámi background. Non-status Sámi find that they do not fit into the common picture of the Sámi and the definition of a Sámi person: they are not acknowledged as Sámi, and they do not feel that they are Finns.

## **Discussion**

### *A typical language shift and revitalisation process among Non-status Sámi*

In this study, it is neither relevant nor possible to describe the exact degree of language skills for each generation, as the language shift has taken place in the course of a relatively long time. Therefore, we start the discussion of the study showing an example of a typical language shift and revitalisation process by a generation among the Non-status Sámi. Figure 1 is an example the language history of one Non-status Sami family, namely Dr. Sarivaara’s own family.

**Figure 1. An example of the loss and revival of Sámi for eight generations**

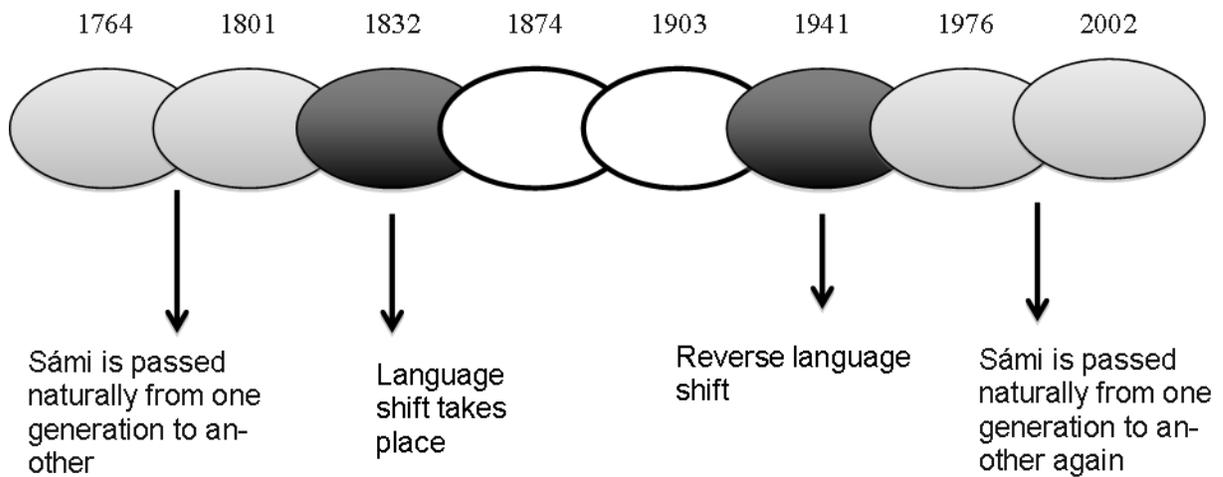


Figure 1 contains eight generations of a Non-status Sámi family. Each oval symbolises one generation, and the numbers above the ovals show the years when the people were born. The levels of shading illustrate knowledge of the Sámi language, which is relevant in this context. However, this does not exclude the possibility of the person having known or knowing other languages as well. We emphasize that the figure indicates skills in the Sámi language, but does not indicate possible skills in other languages. The grey colour symbolises knowledge of Sámi, whereas the white ovals symbolise not knowing Sámi. More specifically, grey symbolises bilingualism, as three of the people that have been marked as grey have known at least Sámi and Finnish.

The figure shows eight generations of which three or four have had no knowledge of the Sámi language. The ancestor who was born in 1832 has been marked with the black oval which means that she is presumed to have had at least a passive knowledge of Sámi. It is noteworthy that she did not pass the Sámi language on to the next generation. In the figure, the person born in 1976, Dr. Sarivaara herself, had not learned Sámi at home, but she has revitalised her ancestral language outside home, for example, at school and through Sámi language courses. The Sámi language, which no one knew in her family for about 100 years, has been revived; through learning and revitalising it, she made it alive again. The last oval symbolises her child, who was born in 2002 and has learned Sámi ever since his birth. In this family, the Sámi language is again being passed on through a generation in a natural way, after a break of some 150 years.

### *Reclaiming the language*

Language revitalisation is a process which prevents language decline or assimilation. In language revival, the use of the language is restored after it has declined or ended completely (Fishman 1991; Huss 1999; Rasmussen 2005; Satta 2005; Todal 2002). In this study, language revitalisation means that the Sámi language is revived into use after having been lost from the family. According to Lindgren (2000), language revitalisation is part of linguistic emancipation, a process in which the status of a dead language is improved through cultural-political measures in society. This means that the language does not get the same status as it had before revitalisation, but linguistic rights are enhanced and the use of the language begins, for example, in public arenas.

This study has focused on the language revival of individual language-speakers. The revitalisation of Sámi languages is connected to the ethnic awakening of the Sámi which began in the 1970s (Stordahl 1997). Education and other measures that have aimed at promoting the Sámi language have made language revitalisation possible for Non-status Sámi. The interviews showed that they have usually learned Sámi at the Sámi Education Institute, in Inari, Finland, which is financed by the Finnish government. In addition to this school, the comprehensive schools of the Sámi region in which Sámi is taught and the Giellagas Institute of the University of Oulu have been important institutions for the language revival of Non-status Sámi.

Based on the results, we want to stress that language revitalisation is a long and challenging process for both individuals and society. Despite language revitalisation, the social position of this group remains ambiguous. This became quite evident in the research partners' interviews.

### **Conclusion**

The approach to the definition of a Sámi and the inner structures of Sámi society is a critical question. The history of colonisation and the assimilation processes of Sámi have gradually led to the present situation in which Non-status Sámi are in a marginal position in Sámi society. In their families, Sámi has not been spoken for generations. Nevertheless, Non-status Sámi have revitalised this lost language and begun to use it in their lives. They feel that they belong to the Sámi community, and the knowledge of Sámi has helped them integrate into Sámi society.

According to this study, language revitalisation manages to cross boundaries. Here, this means that the official definitions of society and marginality do not prevent revitalisation. Reclaiming the Sámi language is a powerful process, which strengthens an individual's sense of belonging and starts the process of Sáminisation. The marginality of Non-status Sámi does not stop them from reviving the language.

Language shift involves a situation where the gradual displacement of one language to another occurs. The factors that contribute to threaten languages are varied and complex. Indigenous languages appear to be more threatened than ever in the 21st century. Reclaiming an ancestral language is a process which is part of revitalisation. Revitalisation aims to hinder and reverse language shift, for example, by getting more speakers to language, both by activating native speakers, and by involving neo-speakers (Fishman 1991; Laoire 2008; Todal 2002).

According to King (2009), reclaiming an ancestral language is associated with ancestors and culture. She points out that a strongly-held worldview engages with and maintains involvement with the Indigenous language. In addition, the discussion about who is Indigenous is current globally. Broadly, the criteria for Indigenous status is defined by the state, which may lead to problematic issues such as diminishing number of Indigenous people as well as an ambivalent identity for Non-status Indigenous people (Bayefsky 1982; Cornet 2003; Magnet et al. 2005).

The exclusion of Non-status Sámi relies on a narrow interpretation of the definition of Sámi. The definition includes self-identification, Sámi as a first language, and Sámi roots. However, given the low number of Sámi people, and even lower number of Sámi-speaking people, it might be time to reconsider the definition. Namely, the official statistics on Finnish Sámi show that there are about 2600 Sámi-speakers in Finland (Finnish Sámi Parliament 2008). Thus, most Sámi (70%) do not know the language of

their own people. This study contributes to a discussion of Indigeneity. Sium, Desai and Ritskes (2012: viii) argue that rather than pure and easily identifiable, 'Indigeneity is full of contestation and contradiction, both within itself and in relation to outside forces'.

According to Ofelia Garcíá (2011), small (Indigenous) languages need careful language planning and protection to preserve linguistic diversity in the world, and sometimes radical action may be taken. Indigenous peoples must confront existing colonial institutions and structures and actively engage in everyday practices of resurgence (Corntassel 2012). Without speakers, there is neither language nor foundation for developing Indigenous education (Wane 2009). The way Non-status Sámi described in this study revitalised their Indigenous language provides a good example of the decolonising praxis that enhances the survival of Indigenous cultures. We regard the group of Non-status Sámi as an exemplary population worth acknowledging when finding ways of revitalising Indigenous cultures and languages. The definition of Indigeneity is multidimensional and at present, the small Indigenous cultures, such as the Sámi, would certainly benefit from increasing the number of language speakers. Therefore, we have suggested that the definition and the essentialist viewpoint of Indigeneity should be reconsidered from the point of view of language revitalisers such as the group of Non-status Sámi.

We argue that it is time to find ways to strengthen endangered cultures and languages by 'constructing the conditions for a different kind of encounter, an encounter that both opposes ongoing colonisation and that seeks to heal the social, cultural, and spiritual ravages of colonial history' (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012: 42). This study contributes to this discussion a new kind of perspective by bringing out the voices of a group that deserves to be heard and from which much can be learned.

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