Giellariššu – Indigenous language revitalization in the city

Scientific paper contribution:
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About 10% of all students in grades 1–10 learning Sámi in Norwegian schools live in the city of Tromsø. Across curricula this group currently makes up 232 pupils who go to more than 20 different schools. In Umeå, Sweden, four different Sámi groups live in the city and 42 pupils attended mother tongue classes in Sámi in the winter 2021. In neither city do the Sámi pupils exceed 3% of their municipal peer group and they are embedded in a local community fully dominated by the majority language. Against this background and the ongoing urbanisation process, Sámi populations’ transfer patterns and the availability of potential arenas of language use for Sámi children and adolescents in the two Nordic cities, we ask the following research questions:

1. What are the eminent challenges of language reclamation, revitalisation and maintenance among young Sámi in these two urban cities?
2. What are the challenges, potential and affordances of the newly established language use arena called Giellariššu – Language shower?

Consequently, we discuss the challenges and opportunities that Sámi children who grow up in two urban environments face in terms of maintaining and developing their indigenous heritage language, and we report from piloted language (re)vitalization activities aimed at complementing the teaching of Sámi and creating visibility and common language arenas. The Sámi language shower - Giellariššu gathers students from different schools on a weekly/monthly basis for activities in Sámi, led by adult speakers and teacher trainees/teachers, with the goal to strengthen pupils’ language skills and the social bonds between children who otherwise do not meet on a regular basis.

This qualitative case-study can be best characterised as belonging to the research tradition of sociology of language within the wider field of sociolinguistics. We present a cross-sectional theoretical-philosophical study of a longitudinal project of linguistic and cultural experiences. Our investigation and observations are based on three central concepts that are most often discussed in the RLS (Reversing Language Shift) research. The central concepts are: language use, language planning, and identity. These concepts have been identified as central factors for defining, evaluating, and assessing contexts for language revitalisation, for the potential of reversing language shift, and for long lasting language maintenance and development efforts. Our analysis and results are mainly based on the investigation of these concepts in connection to numeric and descriptive data from the projects for comparative purposes, the recollections of three young language shower participants on their linguistic and cultural experiences, a popular scientific project report from the Umeå site, notes and observations by participant observers, and yearly surveys among the participating families.

Our findings indicate that the challenges, potential and affordances of new additional language arenas such as Giellariššu are to a large extent dependent on the local premises and resources. We conclude that language showers offer an important addition to maintenance and development of Sámi language among the young Sámi in Tromsø. In Umeå, it may be worthwhile to consider whether a maintenance or a revitalisation program is the more realistic alternative.