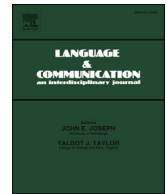


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Investing in indigenous multilingualism in the Arctic

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics between language and identity categories and the boundaries produced in a changing multilingual, indigenous context in the Arctic region of Finland. In this moment of transition, indigenous multilingualism has high stakes. It can be a resource for political and economic development but also for management and regimentation, open to winners and losers. Drawing on a longitudinal critical discourse ethnography of producing language and identity categories in the Finnish Arctic, I discuss three circulating discourses relevant for the ways in which indigenous identity boundaries are made to matter, namely strategic, aspirational and affective multilingualism. I argue that the processes at work are neither simple nor linear, but must be understood as organic, interwoven, and rhizomatic.

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Indigeneity and multilingualism are both part of the lived reality and organizing rationalities in indigenous experience. They are typically embedded in the shifting value of linguistic resources, with their histories interrupted by nation states, reformulated by indigenous political movements and revalued by new global economic opportunities (cf. [Lehtola, 2015](#); [Tuhivai Smith, 2012](#); [Pietikäinen et al., 2016](#)). Together, they provoke a whole web of intertwined discourses, practices, and emotions related to the production of identity and language categories, and the relationship between the two. They also draw attention to the need for and difficulties in governing multiple, ongoing and open-ended language change and its political, social and economic consequences. As [Foucault \(1997a,b\)](#) reminds us, governmentality produces certain rationalities, orders and subjectivities designed to fit the goals of those in power. This means that there are no innocent categories of identity or language; they are all designed to protect the driving rationality behind them, and in so doing they produce boundaries, centres and margins, advantages and disadvantages. Consequently, some identity and language categories work well for some but not for others. When language and identity boundaries are fixed or changed, there are always winners and losers, making the production of categories of language and identity a question of power and inequality.

In this article¹ I explore the dynamics between language and identity categories and the boundaries produced in a changing multilingual, indigenous context in the Arctic region of Finland. Amid the turbulent currents of global changes, the once-peripheral spaces of the Arctic now lie at the epicentre of an ambivalent conjunction of at least three major forces: climate change, expanding economic interest and cultural transformation. Under these changing circumstances, language and identity boundaries that have so far been used primarily for social structuration and political projects have become also resources for economic development in the context of the new economy of experience tourism and markets of authenticity. These boundaries are themselves the object of a new kind of discursive investment and resignification, offering the potential for new types of political and economic gain. These opportunities and challenges are particularly acute for the indigenous Sámi people living in the Arctic. The indigenous Sámi community comprises approximately 60,000–80,000 people, whose

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traditional living area, called *Sámiland* or *Sápmi*, stretches across what is now known as the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. This vast region is sparsely populated and often regarded as a periphery to the southern centres of the state, but it is a heartland for this indigenous community and a growing economic hub for tourism and the extraction of natural resources.

In this moment of transition, indigenous multilingualism has high stakes. It can be a resource for political and economic development but also for management and regimentation, open to winners and losers. Being multilingual by having several indigenous languages in one's language repertoire, in contrast to speaking several majority languages but no indigenous languages, offers people certain resources and positions or disqualifies them from having them. Drawing on a longitudinal critical discourse ethnography of producing language and identity categories in the Finnish Arctic, and especially on multilingualism in indigenous Sámi contexts, I discuss the ways people struggle, strategise and profit from this complex, ongoing and multidirectional language change. I will illustrate some of the ways in which indigenous identity boundaries are made to matter: how they are discursively imagined, struggled over and strategized in this moment of transitions I suggest that one way to examine this complex web of connections and intersections is with the rhizomatic discourse analytical approach (Pietikäinen, 2014, 2015; Heller et al., 2018). This makes use of the conceptualisation of *rhizome* by Deleuze and Guattari, as a construct that sees the processes and events to be observed in terms of *flow* and *dis/connections* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Honan, 2007). Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 23) argue that “the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states”. Relationships between multilingual practices and identity categories are seen as linked to historical, social, economic, and political practices and processes. As Honan (2007) explains, discourses about languages operate in rhizomatic ways: they are not linear or separate, but any text, sign, or speech act is an assembly or a nexus of several interlinked discourses, which are connected to and across each other. Rhizomatic approaches, such as multisided ethnography or nexus analysis, aim to map, trace and connect the various circulations and trajectories in order to provide an explanation for ongoing, multiple, complex processes (cf. Scollon and Scollon, 2004; Heller et al., 2018). Tracing the trajectory of particular categories of language and identity helps to explain the shifting meanings and values of particular categories and the various processes underpinning them. Adopting some of the core ideas of critical discourse studies and critical sociolinguistics, mainly related to the constructive potential of discourse, its historical embeddedness and impact in knowledge production and social organization (cf. e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Heller, 2011; Heller et al., 2018; Pietikäinen, 2016), I understand language and identity as multiple, dynamic sites of struggle and investment, as the object of multiple discourses, continually changing over time and space, with consequences to access to and the value of resources and ultimately, social inequalities. The Foucauldian understanding of discourse sees it as a way to produce knowledge and thus to govern, through the production of categories of knowledge and assemblages of texts, what it is possible and not possible to talk about, what is included and what is excluded (Foucault, 1997a,b; Weedon, 1987). This conceptualization assumes that discourses have material conditions and consequences, and that discourses systematically form, shape, and change the definitions of objects circulating within them (Määttä and Pietikäinen, 2014). I will start with a brief account of the trajectories of Sámi languages and then move on to discuss three discourses of indigenous multilingualism in this context: strategic, aspirational and affective. I will end with a discussion of the possible future of indigenous multilingualism.

1. Indigenous multilingualism in the Arctic: roots and rhizomes

The Arctic has a long history as a multilingual region, not only because of the languages of the people inhabiting the area, but also because of trade, cultural practices and family ties across language and state borders (Lehtola, 2000). For a start, the region is part of the transnational *Sámiland* (*Sápmi*), in which nine indigenous languages are used by speakers across four nation states. The region also features two minority languages – Kven in northern Norway and Meänkieli, spoken around the river Tornio/Torne älv on the northernmost stretch of the Swedish-Finnish border. Then the national layer adds to the multilingualism in the Arctic: the national languages of the four nation states, i.e. Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Russian, are very much present in the region, for example, in administration, education, media, business and everyday life. In many parts of the region, the national majority languages are the only languages used. Thirdly, as the Arctic is a popular destination for international tourism, other languages – English, Russian, French, German, Italian, Japanese – are regularly used at least seasonally in some parts of the area (Pietikäinen et al., 2010).

In this dynamic multilingual context, the status and value of indigenous Sámi languages have changed quite rapidly over the last century. Today, nine different Sámi languages are still spoken, but they are all classified as endangered, with an estimated number of speakers varying from around 250 people up to the approximately 30,000 speakers of Northern Sámi, the biggest Sámi language (Kulonen et al., 2005). In Finnish *Sámiland*, Northern Sámi is the dominant Sámi language, but Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi are also used. According to the Finnish Sámi language act, Sámi people have the right to use their indigenous language with authorities and at school in the Sámi domicile area, i.e. in *Sápmi* (see Aikio-Puoskari, 2002). In practice, this means that the role of a Sámi language varies from speaker to speaker, depending on e.g. age and home region, both impacting on the available Sámi services. Whereas for some the Sámi language is a daily resource for communication, for others it may be a school subject, something encountered later in life, or perhaps a register used only for ritual purposes. There are no monolingual Sámi speakers as everyone in the indigenous community speaks Finnish and often also other languages learnt at school (Swedish, English) or the neighbouring national languages (Norwegian, Swedish, Russian). Thus when speaking about multilingualism in Finnish *Sámiland*, we are inevitably talking about encounters between indigenous and majority languages and related categories and boundaries. As Epps (forthcoming in this issue) notes when discussing multilingualism in the context of Tukanoan in Amazonia, language competences and choices index potential abilities to move in, around and out of specific spaces and

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