

International Year of Indigenous Languages in the Arctic (Part II)

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By Doris Friedrich

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Signing of the Álgú fund founding document at the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Fairbanks in May 2017. The Álgú fund is a charitable Foundation for the Permanent Participants of the Arctic Council. Photo: [Arctic Council Secretariat / Linnea Nordström](#)

The rapid loss of Indigenous languages is the reason behind the United Nations' proclamation of 2019 as International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL), in line with the objectives of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. Of the approximately 7,000 Indigenous languages spoken around the world, four out of ten are in danger of disappearing, the United Nations has reported.¹⁾ The impending extinction of these languages “puts the cultures and knowledge systems to which they belong at risk,” as UNESCO writes.²⁾ This article aims at providing an overview of the state of Indigenous languages in the Arctic, relevant and current issues, as well as the role that regulations play in maintaining and strengthening Indigenous languages. Part I of this series focuses on the example of Canada and examines some of the relevant controversies, cases of dispute, and the delicate balance in state support of Indigenous languages. This article, Part II, aims at providing an overview of the state of Indigenous languages in the Arctic, relevant and current issues, as well as the role that regulations play in maintaining and strengthening Indigenous languages.

Unclear impact, but hopes remain

What impact the IYIL has had on Indigenous languages in the Arctic is still unclear, but the hope is that it will lead to a deeper understanding of the situation and the importance of Indigenous languages, and bring about more support for language preservation and teaching. Some of the outcomes of the IYIL are a flagship publication on Indigenous languages around the world, a publication of research outcomes on traditional knowledge and Indigenous languages, as well as a report on the implementation of the IYIL, including the follow-up beyond 2019.³⁾ Globally, more than 900 events, where Indigenous peoples took part or were beneficiaries, took place. They included among others “awareness raising activities, capacity-building workshops, academic conferences, inter-governmental meetings, theatrical, musical and artistic performances, hackathons and online events”.⁴⁾ To continue the positive trend that came out of the IYIL 2019, the participants of a High-level event organized by UNESCO and Mexico declared the years 2022-2032 as the Decade of Indigenous Languages, in which priority will be placed on the empowerment and Human Rights of Indigenous language users.⁵⁾

Pointing to states’ obligations

Åsa Larsson Blind, former president of the Saami Council, is optimistic. “My hope is that it (the IYIL) will create awareness of the great number of Indigenous languages all over the world that are in a tremendously threatened situation.”

The reasons for the decline of Indigenous languages in the Arctic stem mostly from the establishment of nation-states, which divided peoples through borders, and assimilation policies. While Indigenous languages were forbidden and culture frowned upon during colonial eras, Indigenous children were separated from their families and sent to residential schools with the goal to assimilate them to the colonial powers’ culture and language. This resulted in widespread trauma and with it the rejection of Indigenous languages by many survivors of these systems, not passing it on to future generations.⁶⁾

Nadezhda Mamontova of the University of Oxford, who studies spatial knowledge, language, and adaptation among Siberia’s Ewenki people, revealed in a personal email exchange: “I am not sure that the International Year can make any real impact on the state of Indigenous languages in Russia. The most important initiative is the State Foundation for Support of Minority Languages established by the government in 2019. But they had planned it long time ago and this Foundation has appeared as an alternative to the compulsory teaching of Indigenous languages and other minority languages.”

Russia’s dealings with the Indigenous languages spoken there has attracted widespread criticism in recent years. In 2018, a bill on studying native languages and regional ethnic languages in schools made education in 34 of Russia’s 35 official languages optional, the

exception being the Russian language.⁷⁾ However, Mamontova retains some hope: “In general, the year may help to bring a bit more attention (and funding) to the problem of language transmission and education.”

Mixed picture within the Arctic

The state of Indigenous languages in other Arctic countries seems similarly dire. In a personal exchange, Lenore Grenoble, Chair of the Linguistics Department of the University of Chicago, summarized the situation: “The state of Indigenous languages, their overall vitality and their legal status, varies greatly from country to country, and even from region to region within a county,” Grenoble said. “Kalaallisut (Greenlandic), an Inuit language closely related to Inuktitut and other Canadian Inuit languages, is in the strongest position. It is the national and official language of Greenland, and is spoken by the overwhelming majority of the population (at least 88 percent).” Moreover, people in Greenland have the right to use their language in all spheres, including the government. Many other languages are not in such a strong position, despite the legal protection of Indigenous languages in many regions, and funding for supporting them in some regions.

The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989 (also known as ILO-Convention 169 or C169) for instance, which is the only binding international instrument on Indigenous and tribal peoples, covers the transmission of Indigenous languages to future generations and calls for measures to “preserve and promote the development and practice of the indigenous languages”.⁸⁾ However, of the Arctic states, only Denmark and Norway have ratified the convention.⁹⁾

What is more, the official status and protection of a language is only one side of the picture. How regulations translate into practices and attitudes, is another story, as the regulations are not always implemented as intended and in full extent. Using the languages may also not be prioritized, whether in official communications or in everyday life. Grenoble explains: “Right now I would say that the best practices are in Greenland, where the language has full legal status. Even there, more could be done.” One of the issues is that while technically all government workers are required to know Kalaallisut, not all of them do. This is particularly the case for those from Denmark, who only stay in Greenland for a short period of time. The second-language teaching materials are also worthy of improvement, as Kalaallisut is difficult to learn for English or Danish native speakers. Grenoble concludes: “Still, progress has been made in this area and really, in my opinion it is paradise compared to other places.”

The Nordics: one people – different countries and languages

The homeland of the Saami, Sápmi, is divided between four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Saami encompasses 10 different languages, which are also considered to be dialects by some.¹⁰⁾ Åsa Larsson Blind clarifies the situation of the Saami in the various countries: “All of the Saami languages are threatened, because there are so few speakers. We

are not that many Saami and we have different Saami languages. Some are in better shape than others. Some are almost already extinct in practice, because they are not spoken. And there are several Saami languages that have only a few mother tongue speakers left.”

The allocation of the Saami to different countries, partly with notably differing legal systems, makes the situation even more difficult and increases the need for cross-border cooperation. Larsson Blind adds: “It’s also a great challenge that we are people in four countries. The state borders create boundaries: We have different administrative systems, ambitions and language acts in the various parts of Sápmi.” However, “there is a great awareness now within Sápmi and among Saami people about the importance of keeping the different Saami languages,” she said.

In these four countries, the extent of English knowledge and the understanding between majority languages also varies. While speakers of Scandinavian languages might find it relatively easy to understand each other, having Finnish or Russian as the majority language requires further translation, which adds more levels of translation. As English is often not fluently spoken in the Russian context, it becomes more challenging to include Saami from the Russian side.

Regulations without teeth

Looking at state policies of the four countries dividing the Sámi homeland, Larsson Blind contends that the view in Sweden around 100 years ago was that the Saami languages were considered to inevitably become extinct. As a result, policies have not focused on supporting them as spoken languages. Over the years, this has led to the deterioration of the Saami languages, which “has been allowed to go almost too far.” Changing the direction of the development is challenging.

Larsson Blind posits that the official regulations and rights are not enough: “From my own experience in Sweden I know that the regulations are too soft. It says that the Saami have the right to their language, as we do have as Indigenous Peoples, but it is difficult to actually access the languages. So it comes down to the implementation, as in every other aspect of Indigenous and Saami rights.” Similar to other regions in the Arctic, there needs to be more effort on actually implementing the existing regulations concerning Indigenous languages.

An example from Canada is the Education Act and Inuit Language Protection Act, which promised a fully bilingual education system by 2019. However, as such a system is far from being implemented, a bill to amend the act and extend the deadlines for several of its provisions was introduced and passed the second reading in the Legislative Assembly on June 5, 2019.¹¹⁾ The issue of implementation and the call for “harder” regulations has also become evident in the controversy around Canada’s Indigenous Languages Act (Bill C-91), which was heavily discussed and criticized for not offering binding support for the country’s Indigenous languages. The Act eventually received Royal Assent in June 2019, which turned the bill into law.

From individual projects to long-term programs

A prevalent problem is the financial resources earmarked for Indigenous languages. “The lack of funding is a challenge: We need to get more teachers. We need to get more material. We need funding for the local people, who are committed and want to work with the languages, so they can arrange activities and are able to achieve much more in terms of language revitalization,” Larsson Blind continues.

Despite good methods, best practices, and the knowledge of what is needed, the main problem appears to be the funding of these initiatives: “We have good examples of projects here in Sápmi, which have made tremendous change locally. The knowledge of what is needed to save the language is there, but we need more support to be able to not only have one project here and there, but to establish it as a way of teaching the language and way to support the languages all over Sápmi.”

Some Saami languages are more disadvantaged than others, Larsson Blind suggests. “There are small language groups in Russia. When there are financed language activities, they mostly involve the Saami languages with most speakers, which are not on the Russian side. So they do face additional challenges.”

She also points to how Indigenous languages and rights are deeply intertwined: “This is of course also connected to the Nordic states not recognizing the Saami rights fully. That reflects on the language rights as well.”

Already great local efforts

Despite the challenges, a number of Saami organizations and committed individuals actively support the revitalization of languages. One example of such a project is “Giellagáldu”, a cooperation between the Sámi parliaments of Finland, Sweden and Norway. It lasted from 2015 to 2018 and was funded by the Nordic Resource Centre for the Sámi languages, “Sámi Giellagáldu”. The project’s goal was to “develop, coordinate and strengthen cooperation between Sámi languages.” Concretely, this included tasks on language planning, language development and terminology, standardisation, and place names.¹²⁾ Another type of project are the so-called “language nests”, where children in kindergarten are immersed in a Sámi language environment and learn the language in everyday interactions. This aids language revitalization (see e.g. Laihi 2017 for an analysis of Skolt Saami language nests in Finland).¹³⁾

Some of these grassroots organizations are hosted in the town of Inari, in northern Finland, such as the annual festivals of Indigenous films (Skábmagovat) and music (Ijahis Idja), the cultural centre Sajos, and the museum and nature centre Siida, meaning reindeer pastoralistic district, which was established in 1998. What is more, it is home to the Inari Sámi Language Association, which was founded in 1986 and publishes books and magazines, as well as runs three language nests, which are a form of immersion-based language revitalisation.¹⁴⁾

The use of Saami languages in the media also plays an important role. One example worth mentioning are the efforts of “Yle Sapmi”, the Saami language service of Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle, of expanding their program. In 2013, Yle Sapmi was awarded “Skolt Sámi of the Year”.¹⁵⁾ This year, Norway also set an example in terms of integrating Saami languages, as it sent a song, which mixes English and Saami and includes Saami joik, to the Eurovision Song Contest.¹⁶⁾

While many Saami organizations work with the Saami languages throughout the year, they had little capacity for bigger additional projects in the framework of the IYIL. In particular, there were no special funding opportunities for small Indigenous organizations, Larsson Blind explained. Nevertheless, the Saami parliaments developed initiatives to highlight the IYIL in Sápmi.

Norwegian Saami conference

In February, a Saami conference was arranged by the Saami parliament in Norway. According to Larsson Blind “it was a very good initiative. The challenge was that it was focused on the Norwegian part of Sápmi. Too often, the discussion stays within state borders.”

For the IYIL, the Norwegian Sametinget (Saami Parliament) developed a strategy to enhance the visibility of the Saami culture and languages. While its focus is on Norway, for Larsson Blind there is “hope that it will push the other Saami parliaments in the other states. The Saami Council is pushing for an all-Saami initiative that will bring together the Saami of all four countries as one people, because we believe that it will make us stronger.”

Russia – no language transmission between generations

According to Igor Barinov, Russia’s Head of the Federal Agency of Ethnic Affairs, of the 151 languages spoken in Russia, 18 are in danger of disappearing soon and 14 have already been lost in the last 150 years. Whereas some point to progress in the Russian State’s support of Indigenous languages, such as the establishment of the “Fund for Preservation and Research of Russia’s Native Languages” and experiments with the “language nest” approach,¹⁷⁾ others heavily criticize the development over the last years. Guzel Yusupova, COFUND Junior Research Fellow at Durham University, calls attention to Russia’s two-faced approach of revoking the compulsory teaching of minority languages at schools in its so-called “ethnic republics”, while calling out regulations that favor other languages over Russia as akin to “linguistic genocide”.¹⁸⁾

In Russia, “most of the indigenous languages are endangered, but the situation varies from one region to another. Even within a single language, there might be significant differences between the dialects in terms of language maintenance. However, in most cases there is no

language transmission between generations. One exception is the Nenets language,” analyses Mamontova. “The problem with the Russian legislation in relation to indigenous languages is that it remains on paper.”

In 2018, a draft legislation on the “voluntary teaching of non-Russian languages” passed the first reading of the Russian State Duma, the lower chamber of the parliament. Its stated aim is to specify the law in order to keep a balance between teaching the language of upbringing and the state languages of the various Russian republics. Among others it establishes that the teaching and learning of the republics’ state languages has to be carried out on a voluntary basis and not to the detriment of the Russian Federation’s state language. Experts are skeptical of the legislation and condemn its potential for assimilation, while undermining minority language education.

State of emergency for languages in Alaska

As only the second U.S. state, after Hawaii, Alaska officially recognized 20 Indigenous languages in a largely symbolic move in 2014 and praised “native young adults and students” for their “remarkable success in revitalizing Alaska Native languages”.¹⁹⁾ Nevertheless, one of the state’s official languages, Eyak, died with its last speaker in 2008.

A 2018 report of the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council warned that “Alaska’s languages are in crisis and most are predicted to become extinct (or dormant) before the end of the 21st century”. Besides “cultural justice”, the report focused on “self-determination” regarding the survival of Indigenous languages as one of the key themes.²⁰⁾

After being urged by the legislature and the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council, Alaska’s Governor Bill Walker last year declared the state of emergency for the state’s Indigenous languages.²¹⁾ Among other provisions, it instructs the state commissioners to promote Indigenous languages in public education and to designate a tribal liaison in view of developing a plan to improve collaboration with Alaska Native partners. It further directs the state to use traditional Alaska Native place names on public signs.

The signing of the administrative order kicked off a social justice summit by the First Alaska Institute. One of the Alaska Native representatives at the signing of the order, president of the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes, Richard Peterson, reminded: “Great efforts by elders, students, tribes, Alaska Native organizations and communities have occurred to reverse language loss and there are signs that revitalization is emerging for Alaska Native languages. Even with these efforts, on the current trajectory and with partial action by the State of Alaska, we stand to lose our languages by the end of the 21st century”.²²⁾

Seeing the bigger picture

In conclusion, when talking about Indigenous languages, in the Arctic or elsewhere, it is always advisable to look at current projects and progress while keeping in mind the developments over the last decades or centuries and governments' role in suppressing Indigenous languages and with it cultures, peoples, and communities. To this day, Indigenous languages are being rapidly lost. Much of it stems from colonial assimilation policies, which have caused long-term trauma to Indigenous peoples and have resulted in a weakening of the practice and transmission of Indigenous languages.

Despite these similarities, it is essential to recognize the diverse challenges that Indigenous languages in the distinct Arctic regions face and the discrepancies in their status and well-being. Nevertheless, a basic prerequisite in all these situations is the recognition of Indigenous rights and a willingness to make amends for the damages caused by suppressive systems established by colonial powers and partly upheld by today's political systems.

While most of the Arctic nations have adopted, developed, and improved policies to maintain and support Indigenous languages in the past years or decades, the problems often lie in the implementation of regulations and the financing of measures. Having a "right to their language" does not automatically translate into adequate access, programs, activities, and resources that work towards re-establishing the desired vitality of Indigenous languages. This makes it paramount to legally and financially back programs and activities designed to stop or reverse language loss and to restore a sense of pride in Indigenous languages. The importance of local or regional grassroots organizations, which bear a great part of this work, should be acknowledged and their efforts supported.

Lastly, languages do not only have practical use. They are further tied to Human Rights, identity, culture, and knowledge. As Larsson Blind emphasizes: "Language is so connected to culture and the way people live. When we talk about languages, of course we talk about children's possibilities to learn their language. And that is so important because when we look upon it in a bigger context, it's the possibility to carry on with our culture. And the culture is what makes us a people. So I think that the biggest threat for the languages is that we simplify the role that language has for culture and the way of life. It's important to get the bigger picture of what it's all about."

References[±]