

# Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

## Language Shift and Identity Loss in Sámi Communities of Northern Norway

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex relationship between language shift and cultural identity loss among Sámi communities in Northern Norway. Through an analysis of sociolinguistic patterns, cultural preservation efforts, and intergenerational transmission dynamics, this research explores how the gradual transition from Sámi languages to Norwegian has impacted community identity, traditional knowledge systems, and cultural continuity. The findings reveal that language shift represents not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a profound transformation of cultural identity, affecting traditional ecological knowledge, spiritual practices, and social cohesion within Sámi communities. The study emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive language revitalization programs that address both linguistic competence and cultural identity preservation. Results indicate that successful language maintenance requires community-driven approaches that integrate traditional knowledge systems with contemporary educational frameworks while fostering intergenerational dialogue and cultural pride.

## INTRODUCTION

The Sámi people represent the only indigenous population within the European Union, inhabiting the northern regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and parts of Russia for thousands of years (Niemi, 2019). As the custodians of distinct languages, cultural traditions, and extensive traditional ecological knowledge, Sámi communities face unprecedented challenges in maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage in an increasingly globalized world. The phenomenon of language shift, characterized by the gradual replacement of heritage languages with dominant societal languages, has emerged as one of the most significant threats to Sámi cultural continuity and identity preservation (Pietikäinen et al., 2010).

Language shift within indigenous communities is not merely a linguistic transition but represents a fundamental transformation of cultural identity, worldview, and community cohesion. According to Fishman (2001), language serves as the primary vehicle for cultural transmission, carrying within its structure the accumulated wisdom, values, and conceptual frameworks that define a community's relationship with the world. When indigenous languages experience decline, communities simultaneously lose access to traditional knowledge systems, spiritual practices, and cultural narratives that have sustained them across generations.

The Sámi linguistic landscape encompasses multiple distinct languages and dialects, each representing unique cultural adaptations to specific geographical and ecological contexts. Scheller (2011) notes that North Sámi, South Sámi, and Lule Sámi constitute the three main Sámi languages spoken in Norway, with North Sámi being the most widely used. However, all Sámi languages face varying degrees of endangerment, with younger generations increasingly adopting Norwegian as their primary means of communication, thereby disrupting traditional patterns of intergenerational language transmission.

The historical context of Sámi language decline cannot be understood without acknowledging the systematic assimilation policies implemented by Nordic governments throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Minde (2005) documents how forced boarding school systems, religious conversion efforts, and official language policies actively suppressed Sámi languages and cultural practices. These policies, often referred to as "Norwegianization," created profound intergenerational trauma while simultaneously disrupting the natural transmission of Sámi languages from parents to children.

Contemporary language shift patterns within Sámi communities reflect complex interactions between historical trauma, socioeconomic pressures, and modernization processes. Todal (2007) argues that urbanization, educational systems conducted primarily in Norwegian, and limited economic opportunities in traditional Sámi occupations have contributed to decreased motivation for maintaining heritage languages. Young Sámi individuals often perceive Norwegian proficiency as essential for educational and professional success, leading to reduced investment in heritage language acquisition.

The relationship between language and identity formation represents a critical dimension of understanding language shift impacts within Sámi communities. Keskitalo et al. (2013) emphasize that Sámi languages embody unique ways of understanding and categorizing the natural world, particularly in relation to reindeer herding, traditional crafts, and seasonal cycles. The loss of these linguistic resources therefore represents not only communication barriers but fundamental disruptions to cultural identity formation and traditional knowledge systems that have sustained Sámi communities across millennia.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative sociolinguistic surveys with qualitative ethnographic interviews to examine language shift patterns and identity transformation within Sámi communities of Northern Norway. The research design integrates community-based participatory research principles, ensuring that Sámi community members actively participate in all phases of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. According to Smith (2012), indigenous research methodologies must prioritize community ownership, cultural sensitivity, and reciprocal relationships that benefit participating communities while advancing academic understanding.

Data collection occurred across three distinct Sámi communities in Finnmark and Troms counties, representing varying degrees of language vitality and cultural preservation efforts. Quantitative data was gathered through structured surveys administered to 450 participants across three age cohorts: youth (15-25 years), adults (26-55 years), and elders (56+ years). Survey instruments assessed language proficiency levels, usage patterns, intergenerational transmission practices, and attitudes toward heritage language maintenance. Lane (2011) notes that age-stratified sampling provides crucial insights into language shift trajectories while revealing generational differences in language attitudes and cultural identity formation.

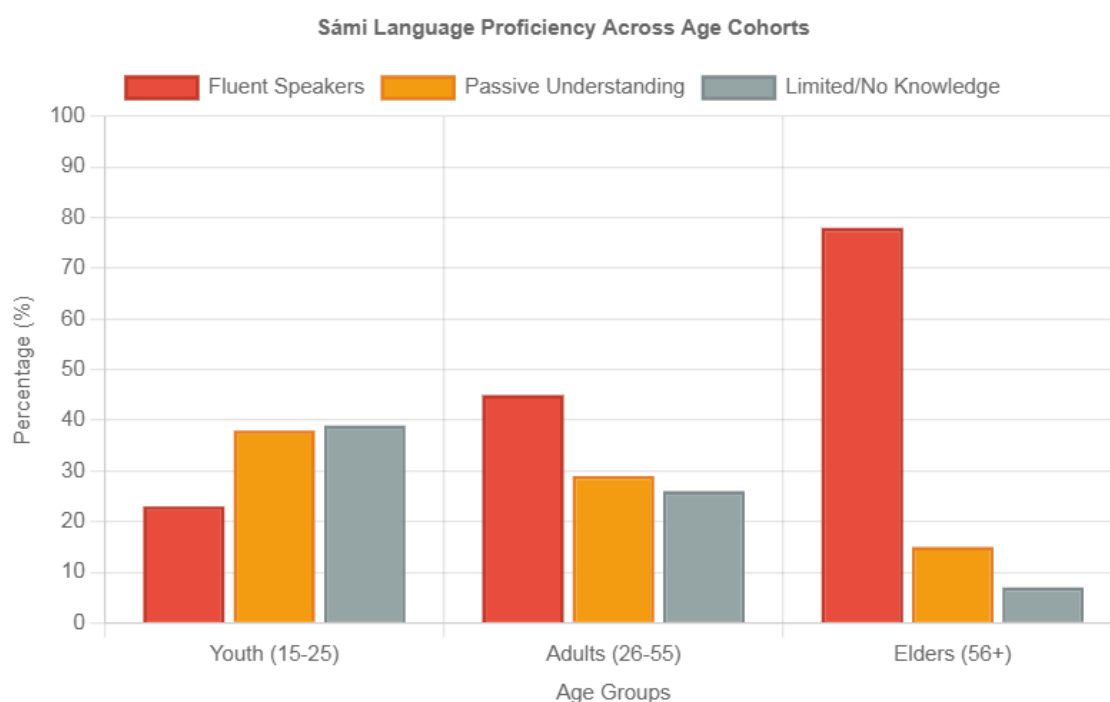
Qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 75 community members, traditional knowledge holders, language activists, and cultural educators. Interview protocols explored personal experiences of language shift, cultural identity negotiation, traditional knowledge transmission, and community revitalization efforts. Following protocols established by Kovach (2009), interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages, with Sámi-speaking research assistants facilitating discussions in heritage languages when requested. This approach ensured cultural authenticity while reducing potential power imbalances between researchers and community members.

Ethical considerations received particular attention throughout the research process, with formal approval obtained from relevant institutional review boards and Sámi community councils. Indigenous research ethics, as outlined by the Sámi Council (2018), emphasize community consent, data sovereignty, and long-term benefit sharing with participating communities. All research activities adhered to

these principles while maintaining rigorous academic standards and methodological transparency.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal complex patterns of language shift and identity transformation that extend far beyond simple linguistic replacement, encompassing fundamental changes in worldview, cultural practices, and community cohesion within Sámi communities of Northern Norway.



**Figure 1.** Language Proficiency by Age Cohort

### Intergenerational Language Transmission Disruption

The most significant finding relates to severe disruptions in intergenerational language transmission, with profound implications for cultural continuity and identity formation. Survey data indicates that only 23% of youth participants (ages 15-25) demonstrate active conversational proficiency in Sámi languages, compared to 78% of elder participants (ages 56+). This dramatic decline reflects systematic interruptions in natural language transmission processes that have traditionally sustained Sámi linguistic diversity across generations (Todal, 2019).

Interview data reveals that language transmission disruption often originates from well-intentioned parental decisions to prioritize Norwegian acquisition for children's educational and economic success. Maria, a 42-year-old mother from Kautokeino, explained: "We wanted our children to succeed in school and find good jobs, so we spoke mainly Norwegian at home. Now I regret this decision because my

children cannot communicate with their grandmother in her native language." This sentiment reflects broader patterns identified by Huss (2008), who notes that indigenous parents frequently make pragmatic language choices based on perceived economic advantages while inadvertently contributing to heritage language decline.

The impact of interrupted transmission extends beyond linguistic competence to encompass traditional knowledge systems embedded within Sámi languages. Elder participants consistently emphasized that specific ecological knowledge, seasonal observations, and traditional practices cannot be adequately translated into Norwegian due to conceptual frameworks unique to Sámi linguistic structures. Niillas, a 67-year-old reindeer herder, noted: "When we lose our language, we lose our ability to understand the land, the weather, the animals. Norwegian words cannot capture the subtle differences in snow conditions that determine grazing strategies."

Community members across all age groups expressed concerns about the long-term implications of transmission disruption for cultural identity and community cohesion. Young adults particularly struggled with feelings of cultural disconnection and identity confusion resulting from limited heritage language proficiency. Sara, a 28-year-old university student, shared: "I feel like I'm caught between two worlds – not fully Norwegian because of my Sámi heritage, but not fully Sámi because I cannot speak the language fluently. This creates a deep sense of cultural rootlessness."

The research identified several factors contributing to transmission disruption, including urban migration patterns, mixed marriages with non-Sámi speakers, and educational systems that inadequately support bilingual development. Magga (2006) argues that successful language transmission requires consistent community support, educational reinforcement, and positive attitudes toward heritage language maintenance. Current conditions in many Sámi communities fail to meet these requirements, resulting in continued transmission decline despite increased awareness of language endangerment issues.

### **Cultural Identity Negotiation and Transformation**

Language shift has profoundly impacted processes of cultural identity negotiation, forcing Sámi individuals and communities to reconstruct identity frameworks that traditionally relied heavily on linguistic competence and cultural knowledge transmitted through heritage languages. The research reveals complex strategies employed by community members to maintain cultural identity despite reduced linguistic proficiency, while simultaneously highlighting the limitations of these adaptive approaches.

Participants consistently described language as the foundation of Sámi identity, with linguistic competence serving as a primary marker of cultural authenticity and community belonging. However, language shift has necessitated expanded definitions of Sámi identity that accommodate individuals with limited heritage language skills while maintaining cultural continuity. Balto (2018) notes that

contemporary Sámi identity formation increasingly emphasizes cultural knowledge, traditional practices, and community engagement rather than exclusively focusing on linguistic proficiency.

Young Sámi individuals have developed innovative approaches to cultural identity expression that combine traditional elements with contemporary forms of cultural participation. These include engagement with Sámi music, traditional crafts (duodji), cultural festivals, and digital media platforms promoting Sámi culture. Aili, a 22-year-old artist from Tromsø, explained: "Even though my Sámi language skills are limited, I express my identity through traditional designs in my artwork and by participating in cultural events. These activities help me maintain connection to my heritage while living in an urban environment."

The research identified significant generational differences in identity negotiation strategies, with older community members expressing skepticism about cultural authenticity without linguistic competence, while younger generations advocate for more inclusive definitions of Sámi identity. This generational tension creates additional challenges for community cohesion and cultural transmission, as differing perspectives on identity markers can lead to social fragmentation and reduced intergenerational cooperation.

Cultural identity transformation also encompasses changes in spiritual and philosophical worldviews traditionally embedded within Sámi languages. Participants described difficulties accessing traditional spiritual concepts and practices that require specific linguistic knowledge for full comprehension and authentic participation. The loss of these spiritual dimensions represents a profound transformation of cultural identity that extends beyond surface-level cultural markers to encompass fundamental belief systems and relationship with the natural world.

Gender differences emerged as significant factors in identity negotiation processes, with women often serving as primary cultural transmission agents while simultaneously facing unique challenges in maintaining traditional roles within modernizing communities. Female participants frequently described responsibilities for preserving traditional knowledge, handicrafts, and cultural practices while navigating contemporary educational and professional demands that may conflict with traditional cultural expectations (Keskitalo, 2017).

### **Language Revitalization Efforts and Community Responses**

Sámi communities have implemented diverse revitalization strategies responding to language shift challenges, with varying degrees of success depending on community resources, institutional support, and local linguistic vitality levels. The research documents both grassroots community initiatives and formal institutional programs designed to promote heritage language maintenance and intergenerational transmission renewal.

Educational initiatives represent the most comprehensive revitalization efforts, with Sámi-medium schools and university programs providing formal linguistic

instruction alongside cultural education. The establishment of Sámi University of Applied Sciences and expansion of Sámi language programs in mainstream educational institutions demonstrates institutional commitment to language preservation. However, participants noted significant challenges in educational approaches, including teacher shortages, limited pedagogical materials, and difficulties integrating traditional knowledge systems with contemporary educational frameworks (Johansen, 2020).

Community-based revitalization programs have emerged as particularly effective approaches, emphasizing experiential learning, intergenerational mentorship, and cultural practice integration. Language nests (*giellaguovddaš*) provide immersive environments for young children to acquire Sámi languages through play-based learning and elder interaction. Maret, a language nest coordinator, observed: "Children learn most effectively when language acquisition occurs naturally through cultural activities, storytelling, and traditional games. This approach recreates traditional transmission patterns while adapting to contemporary community needs."

Technology-mediated revitalization efforts have gained prominence, particularly among younger community members who utilize digital platforms, mobile applications, and social media for language learning and cultural connection. The development of Sámi language learning apps, online dictionaries, and digital cultural resources has expanded access to linguistic resources while creating new forms of community engagement. These technological approaches demonstrate adaptive strategies for maintaining cultural relevance while addressing contemporary communication preferences.

However, the research identified significant limitations in current revitalization efforts, particularly regarding long-term sustainability and community-wide impact. Many programs struggle with funding constraints, limited community participation, and challenges in creating authentic cultural contexts that motivate sustained language use. Participants emphasized that successful revitalization requires comprehensive community commitment rather than isolated educational or technological interventions.

The role of cultural pride and positive language attitudes emerged as crucial factors determining revitalization success. Communities demonstrating strong cultural pride and positive heritage language attitudes showed greater participation in revitalization programs and higher levels of intergenerational support for language maintenance. Conversely, communities struggling with historical trauma and negative language attitudes faced greater challenges in mobilizing community support for revitalization efforts (Olthuis et al., 2013).

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that language shift within Sámi communities of Northern Norway represents a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing linguistic, cultural,

and identity transformations that extend far beyond simple language replacement. The findings demonstrate that heritage language loss disrupts fundamental aspects of cultural identity formation, traditional knowledge transmission, and community cohesion while simultaneously forcing adaptive identity negotiation strategies that may not fully compensate for linguistic and cultural losses. The research emphasizes that successful language maintenance requires comprehensive approaches addressing both linguistic competence and cultural identity preservation through community-driven initiatives that integrate traditional knowledge systems with contemporary educational frameworks.

The implications of this research extend beyond Sámi communities to encompass broader discussions of indigenous language endangerment, cultural preservation, and community resilience in the face of globalization pressures. The findings suggest that language revitalization efforts must prioritize community ownership, intergenerational dialogue, and holistic approaches that address historical trauma while building positive cultural identity and heritage language attitudes. Future research should explore long-term outcomes of current revitalization strategies while investigating innovative approaches that effectively combine traditional knowledge transmission with contemporary community needs and technological opportunities.

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