

Perspectives on Minority Languages in Finland's Language Policy

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Minority languages have only begun to gain visibility in Finland's official language policy since the early 2000s, despite growing attention to linguistic rights and language endangerment of minorities in the latter half of the 20th century. However, the minority languages that have been spoken in Finland for centuries have had very different statuses and have emerged at different times in national language policy.

While the Sámi languages, the forefront in the recognition of linguistic rights, received their own language law in the early 2000s, awareness of the Karelian language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language as distinct languages—separate from Finnish and Finnish Sign Language—was then only beginning to spread from researchers and activists to broader societal discussions. At the same time, the languages of immigrants and the teaching of their native languages also became an important part of the public discussion on multilingualism.

During the 2000s and 2010s, alongside language policy programs addressing the status and future of Finland's national languages, new programs and reports emerged focusing on the situation of the endangered autochthonous minority languages. By the early 2020s, challenges and revitalization goals for several minority languages of Finland were consolidated in the Finnish Government's language policy program, which specifically addressed Sámi languages, Finland's Romani language, Karelian, and the two sign languages used in Finland. By the mid-2020s, revitalization programs have been developed for all of these language groups.

Support for these different languages has been approached from a variety of perspectives and justifications. For example, the human right and linguistic rights of the Sámi people are closely tied to the international discourse on indigenous peoples, while the rights of sign language users are strongly linked to disability perspectives and rights. Moreover, the history of supporting Finland's Romani language is partially connected to advancing the education of the Romani children.

In my presentation, I will examine the perspectives, discussions, and arguments related to the support of Finland's minority languages from the 2000s to the 2020s, as well as the overall picture that emerges from the society's relationship with these minority languages. In this way, I aim to show how autochthonous minority languages have gradually become part of national language policy in Finland through public discourse.

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