

***Towards openly multilingual policies and practices:
Assessing minority language maintenance across
Europe***

**Johanna Laakso, Anneli Sarhimaa, Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark
and Reetta Toivanen (2016)**

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In recent decades, there has been some research on the situation of European minority languages. However, we still know only a little about it. We know even less about the status and use of the Finno-Ugric minority languages in the European countries. The book by Johanna Laakso, Anneli Sarhimaa, Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark and Reetta Toivanen adds to our knowledge of these groups. The authors describe the situation of 12 Finno-Ugric minority language groups in several European countries and report on the results of the unique ELDIA project (European Language Diversity for All). The book contains a lot of new important information on the current situation of the Finno-Ugric minority languages in Europe. The authors have even developed a barometer, EuLaViBar (European Language Vitality Barometer), which will enable future researchers to approach different minority language groups. The project ELDIA was funded by the European Commission from the 7th framework programme between the years 2010 and 2013. ELDIA is one of the most successful projects in helping to understand the real linguistic diversity in European countries, providing a basis

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for future measures to analyse minority languages and the situation of their users under different circumstances. ELDIA is also the first project in which a large number of Finno-Ugric minority languages in the European countries have been studied in such a versatile manner.

Chapter 1 introduces a discussion of the key concepts, such as the idea of *monolingual bias*, *multilingualism*, *mother tongue*, and *minority*. While multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception in the world, it is often understood through the ideology of monolingualism, and the languages are seen as separate. In linguistic research, the monolingual bias has been increasingly criticised by many operators. The authors stress that the starting point of the ELDIA project was that the use of many languages in any situation is a normal way of communication. Hence, it is not just about using languages in a parallel manner but their being present in all situations. In addition, the authors discuss diverse multilingualism, which means that languages are implicitly, or often also in practice, divided into two categories: the high-status major languages should be learned and the knowledge of these languages is regarded as better multilingualism, while the low-status minor languages are not seen as tools of communication, identity construction and knowledge, and therefore they are not supported. The authors discuss terms like *old* and *new minorities*, *indigeneous people*, *autochthonous* and *allochthonous minorities* as well as the useful term *superdiversity* in the current contexts of the Finno-Ugric languages in Europe. The discussion on the terms and their content is interesting and provides an excellent basis for presenting the project's starting points and orienting the results.

In the ELDIA project, nine languages and 12 speech communities were studied: Hungarian in Slovenia and Austria, Estonian in Germany and Finland, Karelian in Finland and in Russian Karelia, North Sámi and Kven in Norway, Seto and Võro in Estonia, Veps in Russian Karelia, and Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish) in Sweden. At the outset, the languages also included Finnish used in Sweden, but this had to be abandoned. The list shows that there are languages with a strong state language background (Hungarian, Finnish, Estonian), languages used in more than one country as an indigenous language (North Sámi) or as a minority language (Karelian), and languages used mainly in only one area in one country (Kven, Meänkieli, Seto, Võro and Veps). A detailed material analysis and barometer offer the reader information on these less-known minority languages in Europe, together with a better understanding of the nature of the versatile linguistic diversity in Europe.

In Chapter 2 the authors describe the EuLaViBar (European Language Vitality Barometer), the tool they developed in the project. EuLaViBar consists of four main devices: a systematic method of data collection with a questionnaire survey,

a system for operationalising the survey results with regard to language maintenance or loss, a calculation formula for analysing the survey data and a polar diagram presenting the results in a graphic form. The project was inspired by François Grin's three decisive conditions for language use: *capacity*, *opportunity* and *desire*. These focus areas were used in addition to a fourth one, *language products*, which covers all products and services available in the language at issue. The dimensions within the focus areas represented Legislation, Education, Media, and Language Use and Interaction.

The ELDIA language maintenance scale comprised five categories: 0 Language maintenance is severely and critically endangered, 1 Language maintenance is acutely endangered, 2 Language maintenance is threatened, 3 Language maintenance is achieved to some extent, and 4 The language is maintained at the moment. The analysis of different languages is multi-level and versatile. However, the authors warn that the Barometer, created with many details, does not have universal predictive force. Rather, it provides an overall picture: all these language varieties are more or less endangered. An interesting and a slightly sad result is that even liberal democracies, like Finland, Sweden and Norway, are not doing enough to guarantee support to minority languages.

The results are presented according to the language groups in detail in Chapter 3. The authors describe the different backgrounds and current situations of the languages studied, using an efficient metaphor: the project compares apples, oranges, and even cranberries among the Finno-Ugric languages in the European environment. The presentation gives a good understanding of the situation of the individual languages, as well as a picture of common and different features of the languages and language groups studied. Next I will offer an introduction of the main results of every language situation in a nutshell.

Hungarian in Slovenia is endangered despite strong legal protection. This is an illustrative example of how legislation alone is not enough to support the use of minority languages. The maintenance of Hungarian in Austria is also endangered beyond doubt. There are different groups of speakers, the so-called old minorities and diverse immigrants, and the differences between them are not seen in the overall picture of Hungarian in Austria.

Estonian in Germany is strongly used in private contexts, but it is not publicly visible. The results show that the Estonian minority is completely invisible in Germany. The overall situation of Estonian in Finland resembles that of Estonian in Germany: despite strong scores for language skills and language use, the results also indicate an endangerment of the language in Finland. It is possible that Estonian speakers will be assimilated into Finland even more efficiently than elsewhere, especially as Finnish is close to their native language and easier for

Estonian people to adopt than other languages. In my view, this does not remove Finland's responsibility for how Estonian is maintained in the country, even if the Estonians themselves stress their own responsibility for the maintenance of their mother tongue.

The minority languages in southern Estonia, Seto (*setu* in Estonian) and Võro (*võru*) are very close to each other, although their background, religion and culture are different. Seto is endangered in all dimensions and focus areas. The best scores, even if relatively poor, were reached on the dimension of 'Language Use and Interaction'. The results for Võro resemble those for Seto. Võro is also endangered in all dimensions and focus areas, and the best scores, even if weak, were reached in the dimension of 'Language Use and Interaction', especially in spoken interaction.

The situation of Karelian was studied in Finland and Russia. In Finland, the Karelian language is seriously endangered, and the scores were the second weakest in the ELDIA study. There are many reasons for this: lack of support, weak cultivation, lack of acknowledgement and assimilation pressure. Up to now, Karelian has been regarded as a dialect of Finnish. However, there are still Karelian speakers, including young ones, with good language skills. The situation of Karelian is no better in Russia; the Barometer indicates that the language is seriously endangered in Russian Karelia. Similar results concern Veps in Russia. The best, though weak scores of Veps were reached in the dimension of 'Language Use and Interaction'.

Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish) in Sweden has weak presence and poor opportunities. Even if Meänkieli has a minority language status in Swedish legislation, many respondents in the survey were ignorant about the institutional and legal support for the language. This is again – as is the case with the Karelian language in Finland – an example of how a strong democratic state does not sufficiently protect the achievement of the linguistic rights of its minorities.

In Norway, the project covered Kven and North Sámi, both used mostly in the northern part of the country. All the scores for Kven are alarmingly low, the lowest results in the whole project. It means that Kven is critically endangered, even if the Kvens have been acknowledged as a national minority in Norway since 1996. Instead, the indigenous language, North Sámi in Norway, has the best overall EuLaViBar scores in the whole ELDIA study. However, there are massive differences between the individual dimensions and focus areas among North Sámi speakers.

In Chapter 4 the authors evaluate the EuLaViBar tools and ask if we can trust the Barometer results. The discussion on the problems is open, and during the process the project group evaluated the tools. In the end, the project used the

corrected version of EuLaViBar. Despite problems of, e.g., sampling the respondents for the questionnaire survey in some environments and the partial overlap of dimensions, and maybe also of focus areas to some extent, the results can be used for many purposes. However, the authors stress that in order to really understand these results, you must know the details of the study. In this chapter, the authors compare the most important results of case studies and discuss them according to the focus areas. The summarizing presentation and discussion provide a good overall picture of the results of this versatile study.

The researchers of the ELDIA project do not only analyse and give descriptions of the language groups studied, but they are aware of their responsibility as language policy actors. In Chapter 5 the authors present implications and recommendations on how to maintain European linguistic diversity. In conclusion, the key factors for the vitality of a language are intergenerational transmission, active language use in many contexts and functions, and institutional and societal support. This implies language transmission in families, explicit state-funded revitalisation programmes, support of the multilingualism of migrants, encouragement of language users, better information of the rights, non-discrimination frameworks developed with the language communities, and resources for the minority media. Hence, there are many actors, from family members to politicians at the European and national levels, who can support and develop the diversity of languages.

The ELDIA study presented by Laakso, Sarhimaa, Spiliopoulos Åkermark and Toivanen is important and interesting in many ways. The book is rich in content, and, because of that, readers have access to much more information about the diversity of European languages and language groups than before. Researchers can learn a lot from the methods used in the project and they can continue to develop them in the future. The book is important for the minorities themselves but also for the majorities in every country and for decision-makers at different levels. I hope teachers, local politicians, and members of Parliament, as well as politicians at the European level, read the book and gain a better picture of the real diversity or the lack of it, and use this as a foundation for minority language policy decision-making. The book encourages cooperation between different groups to improve people's language rights, thereby making the world a little better and more equal.

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