

Anita Lehikoinen

## Address

It is a great pleasure to be here at this conference, hosted by the Institute for Languages in Finland, to discuss language use in public administration. This is a very important topic, close to our hearts at the Ministry of Education and Culture. To start with, I venture to say that in Finland the situation with regard to improving administrative language is quite good. The Institute for Languages is an important agency with considerable influence in our country. Its experts have managed to convince us how significant good language is for democracy, and even for productivity in the public sector. Besides this, the institute has made us enthusiastic about working on good language and communication. I feel that the ministry and institute share a common will and enthusiasm for further and continuous development of administrative language. This shows that the institute has really succeeded in communicating with our administration!

Finland is a bilingual country with two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. The Government Resolution on the Strategy for the National Languages of Finland, issued in 2012, expresses the intention to maintain these two as viable national languages far into the future. Outlines and actions to reach this objective have been written into the strategy.

The language landscape in Finland is rich and varied, and this is how we want to keep it. Our national minority languages are part of this landscape. All three Sami languages spoken in Finland are threatened; two of them, Inari Sami and Skolt Sami, are seriously threatened. A year ago the Government issued a resolution on an action programme to revive the three Sami languages in our country. More education both about the Sami languages and in these languages is now given, especially in areas outside the Sami Homeland, because this is where the majority of the Sami people live today. To do this, distance learning is used. What is positive is that teaching in the three Sami languages is available in all municipalities within the Sami Homeland. Teaching is also available in all the subjects taught in basic education. For the development of the Sami language and culture it is vital that they are taught and studied at universities. The University of Oulu has been assigned a national mission to address this by means of special funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture.

With regard to the Romani language, a solution has been found now that the University of Helsinki offers the opportunity for the teaching and study of Romani language and culture. This is important because teaching and study at university level is a condition for the production of learning material, the education of teachers, and the further development and continuity of the

language. Experts in Romani language and culture can now be educated for specialist tasks in teaching (and producing the material for this), communication and culture. Achieving this took quite a long time, but we are very happy with the result.

The academic tradition for sign language is somewhat older. Today it has an established position in university education, with the future secured by means of financial support from the Ministry of Education and Culture to pursue this national mission. This is founded on the teaching and study of sign language, the education of sign language teachers and a professorship in sign language studies introduced at the University of Jyväskylä in the 1990s. Now there is an academic community in Jyväskylä where people using sign language can study in their own mother tongue. This community has been very active in international cooperation, as can be seen in their numerous international projects and events. One important future challenge is to have enough research to lay the foundation for further development of teaching and materials for this. The sign language community itself has indicated that teaching often suffers from a lack of learning material. Serious research efforts are needed to support this development work. One important step in terms of the position of sign language was the coming into force of the national Sign Language Act securing the rights of sign language users last May.

The Karelian language has been spoken in our country for as long as Finnish, but in a way it can be considered a recent immigrant among our minority languages. There has been a professorship in the Karelian language at the University of Eastern Finland since the beginning of 2009. In the same year the Karelian language was recognised as a minority language, as it was included in the reporting of the regional and minority languages of the Council of Europe by a decision of the President of the Republic. The Karelian language can be recorded as a mother tongue in the Population Information System of the Population Register Centre. The Karelian language is being taught on a local basis and “language nest” activities have been launched. Several Karelian societies publish literature in the Karelian language, and newspapers and magazines are eligible for so-called press support for minority languages. We can therefore say that a revitalisation programme for the language is well under way.

A new national core curriculum will be introduced in the Finnish basic education system from the beginning of next year. One of the objectives is for linguistic and cultural awareness to be part of the operating culture of schools. In this context linguistic awareness means a community-level understanding of the important role of language in learning, teaching and identity building. In a school with high linguistic awareness, the special characteristics of the language used in the different branches of knowledge are known. Language is highly valued and both the languages taught and pupils’ mother tongues are strongly present in various school situations.

The objective concerning linguistic and cultural awareness is very demanding, as it calls for changes in the ways we are used to thinking and acting. School management and teaching staff must have a deep understanding that highly qualified, ethical teachers must always be teachers of language and culture as well, even when the main teaching content is something other than language. Supplementary education will be needed to succeed in this.

Linguistic and cultural awareness has become even more important now that growing numbers of asylum seekers are bringing new features to our language landscape. Our language reserve is becoming richer and more diverse, but there are considerable challenges as well. There is an urgent need for a language strategy to outline the necessary actions for language teaching, research and language policy development.

Besides developing teaching in our national languages, teaching the mother tongues of the immigrant population is one of the main future challenges. Studies have shown that learning one's mother tongue supports the learning of other languages and success at school in general. Preserving and improving one's mother tongue skills are important for self-esteem and identity building. The role of the mother tongue has also been proven in the PISA results. The learning results of pupils with immigrant backgrounds have been better in countries where teaching of the mother tongue and functional bilingualism are promoted, besides teaching the target language. Early childhood education is also important in this. The early years of one's life are the most important time for language learning, and bilingualism should be promoted both in early childhood education and at home. Parents may not be aware of the challenges relating to a child's linguistic development, which is why they should not be left alone in these areas. Early childhood education and the school system must support the learning of one's own mother tongue among children with immigrant backgrounds.

Teaching a range of mother tongues requires long-term planning, both in municipalities and at the central government level. In this context it is important to reflect on the role and tasks of mother-tongue teachers. We know very well that their role in the school community is considered particularly important when the teacher functions as a liaison between home and school and helps in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the teaching process as a whole

What is particularly worrying with regard to pupils with immigrant backgrounds is that mother-tongue teachers are difficult to find. Many of the teachers that are recruited have no teacher education or education in the language they should teach. Organising the education of mother-tongue teachers is not a simple matter. Decisions have to be made as to the languages in which education for mother-tongue teachers can be provided. Obviously such education cannot be arranged in all languages now being taught as the mother tongue – more than 50 in total. I see and hope for opportunities for collaboration in teacher education between different countries.

Now back to the topic of this conference, language use in public administration. We live in a society where we have to be able to communicate in diverse ways. Free public dialogue is the cornerstone of democracy. In order for that cornerstone not to disintegrate and crumble, every member of society must have the opportunity to take part in discussion on common issues. This opportunity only exists when the language used in the dialogue is clear and understood by all. Understanding is necessary to form opinions and have influence.

In our administration we must bear in mind that people are not experts in everything, which is why linguistic differentiation within the administration should be avoided. Hiding behind the jargon used in one's own specialist field often leads to cumbersome language. This increases the distance between administration and citizens, and may also be an obstacle to cooperation between administrative branches. It is more difficult to access information and use services. This problem is particularly prominent in the language of economy and finance, and when major reforms are being launched. The temptation to come up with obscure new expressions is great, but this can be overcome when we all pull together and ask the simple question "Is the new concept clear and understandable?"

Good administrative language is a key factor in good governance. Through open knowledge and data, open action and clear language, administration becomes a facilitator instead of being an obstructor or alienator. For me, good administrative language is one of the factors by which we can assess the quality of our administration. I was very pleased to see the excellent outcome of the campaign to promote good administrative language launched in Finland about a year ago, as indicated by the results of the administrative language contest which reveal the work done on renewing the language used in several fields of our administration.

I am confident that the varied content of this conference and the input of the highly qualified experts we have here will further encourage us to be active friends, promoters and supporters of good administrative language.

**Bibliographical information**

This text was first published in the book:

Pirkko Nuolijärvi/Gerhard Stickel (eds.) (2016): Language use in public administration. Theory and practice in the European states. Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2015 in Helsinki. Budapest: Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences. [ISBN 978-963-9074-65-1. 207 pages.]

The electronic PDF version of the text is accessible through the EFNIL website at:

<http://www.efnil.org>