

**MSC 2020**  
**International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.  
COMMUNICATION»**

**TEACHING AND LEARNING A LANGUAGE IN A MINORITY  
CONTEXT**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how teachers perceive teaching a pluri-centric national minority language, in this case Swedish as a second language in Finland, and in comparison, with Danish, Norwegian and Swedish teachers views on teaching national majority languages as second language. The research method that is used in this study consists of qualitative analysis of professional terminology in second language teachers' description of their own teaching and of classroom observations of their teaching. The material includes 13 interviews conducted with second-language teachers and field notes from classroom observations in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The result show that teachers in Finland did not demonstrate any awareness of that Swedish is a pluricentric national minority language in Finland. None of the Finnish interviews used any explicit terminology regarding pluricentric language but only common terms such as grammar, pronunciation, illiteracy etc. No distinctions were made between teaching Swedish as second language, a minority language or national language. Everything was simply called Swedish. All interviews also favored a monolingual teaching approach. The Finnish teachers' strategy is most consistent with views of teachers teaching non pluricentric language in Denmark. The view on teaching Swedish as second language in Finland differed most from the views of teaching Swedish as second language in Sweden. The scope of the results and research prospects can be used to improve understanding of the complexities of teaching second language in different contexts.

2357-1330 © 2021 Published by European Publisher.

*Keywords:* Majority languages, minority, second, teaching



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## 1. Introduction

Swedish, regarded as one and same language in Finland and Sweden, makes a typical example of asymmetric pluricentric language. This means that the language is spoken in different countries, in our case in Sweden, Finland and autonomous Åland. One of these countries and its variety, in our case Swedish in Sweden, is the dominant language, standardizing the other varieties based on its number of speakers and its historical, cultural and political dominance, while the non-dominant varieties found in other countries lack similar opportunities, in our case Ålandic and Swedish in Finland. Features of asymmetric pluricentric languages are described more in detail in (Muhr, 2005).

This is then a study of teaching migrants Swedish as an asymmetric pluricentric language in a national, regional and transnational context. More specifically we are investigating how language teachers perceive and deal with contextual challenges in the light of the fact that the typical context of teaching second language for migrants is a national majority language in a clearly defined “one nation only” context. Also the terminology of the subject of second language implies that a one nation context is seen as the typical case, meaning that the learning of second language takes place in the country where language is spoken as a majority language, while the learning of foreign languages takes place outside the country (Hammarberg, 2013). In this study, we also draw attention to the terminology as a tool of professional thinking and as the core of professional communication (Ge & Chen, 2018; Harbour & Gauthier, 2017). As a tool of thinking and communication, terms also implicate theories about the reality in which they are suitable to use. “The development and use of any tool implies a theory of practice that defines the contexts in which it should – and should not – be applied, the issues it addresses and ignores – and the roles of experts and non-experts in using the tool and its products.” (Klosterman, 2008, p. 86). This means then that to a great extent, terms are about what might be envisaged, said and done in a professional context. As for the profession, Colnerud and Granström (2002) considers that teachers lack an explicit professional language, which however is a prerequisite for being able to formulate, develop and communicate teachers' special professional skills. The latter is also a motive for examining contexts where teachers' use of terminology is put to the test. This current qualitative study is also a suitable starting point for a discussion on of how language teachers teach and talk about their teaching in relation to the complex contexts, such as asymmetric pluricentric languages. The language in our case is Finnish Swedish taught as an *additional language* for migrants in Finland and the autonomous region of Åland belonging to Finland. Swedish Swedish is then a part of this transnational context together with the entire Nordic region. Some examples of linguistic terms associated with the international, national and regional context are *second language* and *first language* (Hammarberg, 2013), *majority language* and *minority language* (Lainio, 1999), *national language* and *dialect* (Sahlée, 2017) as well as terms such as *multilingualism* and *translanguaging* (Otheguy et al., 2018). The term *second language* can be used as further an illustration. Its synonyms are *additional language* and the shortening *L2*. There are slight differences between synonyms regarding the semantic information they give. The term *additional language* does not say anything specific about the exact order, but the term *second language* of course does, and in this respect the term *additional language* is broader and gives less contextual information than the term *second language*. There are also connotative differences between *additional* and *second*. *Second language* is an established term and used both in research and in

teaching (Hammarberg, 2013) but it also has been problematized through its connotations of a second-class language, affecting students and teachers who teach the subject. Moreover, critics argue that this view also comes true in the activities that the term denotes. Economou (Economou, 2015, p. 23) writes, that the teaching of *second language* is perceived as exclusionary and as a contributing factor to segregation, while defenders of the subject argue that the problems are due to lack of knowledge, resource shortages and unrealistic demands on second language students. The latter would thus, according to the defenders, show that the criticism is unwarranted and instead a motive for addressing knowledge and resource deficiencies in order to give the subject better conditions for living up to its potential. In the debate mentioned above, the linguistic term, teaching subject, methods of teaching and the outcomes are treated as identical, which they of course do not have to be, but at the same time, these associative interconnections also illustrate how terms implicate subjects, methods and theories. .

## 2. Problem Statement

Regarding our own definitions and descriptions of terms, our general attitude can be illustrated by Wittgenstein who says that "meaning is use" (Gieseletter, 2014, p. 69), which we in this case relate to the external context. The lack of usable terms could lead to something comparable to Wittgenstein's conclusion in *Tractatus*, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 74). The paradox called Liars paradox can be used as an example of how usable professional terms can make a difference.

After more than a thousand years of fruitless attempts, there finally was a breakthrough in explaining the paradox by using the term *meta-language* (Quine, 1976; R ih a, 2008). The problem with the Liar paradox arises because our interpretation attempts simply mix up object-language and meta-language without us discovering it. Let's look at the following example where Donald says that he is lying. Donald's statement can, in part, be interpreted as an everyday commentary on Donald himself, that is, the person called Donald does not speak the truth. At the same time, the statement can also be interpreted as a meta-linguistic statement saying that the statement *does not speak truth* is not true (that it lacks truth content), which then says nothing definite about Donald. Now we can see that the cycle occurs when we alternately interpret the statement as something said about Donald and something said about the statement itself. In order to avoid this kind of paradoxes in the future, we could, thanks to this our new insight, introduce a rule saying that a statement should not be interpreted as both object-language and meta-language at the same time. Similar insights formulated in ordinary everyday language could be formulated as, one should not say two different things at the same time, which may sound sensible but hardly help us to understand complex things such as paradoxes. Suitable terms can then make it easier to get a grip on and talk about complex phenomena.

## 3. Research Questions

- How can Finnish Swedish in Finland be described as an additional language for migrants in regional, national and transnational contexts?
- Are there descriptions of complexity in the teacher's description of their teaching?

- Do language teachers use explicit professional terminology when they are describing their teaching?
- How and in what terms can teachers teaching be characterized?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim is to study Finnish language teachers' accounts of teaching, and how they teach Finnish Swedish for migrants in Finland in relation Sweden and other Nordic countries.

#### **5. Research Methods**

After this initial discussion, we take a closer look at how professional teachers who teach migrants in Swedish in Finland view their teaching and what terms they use in connection with this. Our material consists of 13 interviews with active language teachers working with adult education in four Nordic countries, namely Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark. The interviews departed from open questions concerning the teachers' views on language education, integration and citizenship. All the interviews were recorded and conducted on language trainings centers, except two of them from Denmark that were made by using Skype. The material also includes observations of teachers' teaching in Finland, Sweden and Denmark. The observations were made at two occasions and lasted two hours each in every country. The documentation was based on an observation schedule, guided by a translanguaging based view on language learning (García, & Wei, 2018), and in addition field notes were also made. Every observation was made by two observers. The collected material was analyzed qualitatively through a categorization of themes, formulations and occurrence of explicit professional terminology in teachers' description of their own teaching as well as analysis of classroom observation charts and field notes. In this study the material collected from Finland is in focus together with material from Sweden and Denmark.

#### **6. Findings**

##### **6.1. Three Swedish contexts in Finland**

Let us first comment on relationships between languages, nations, regions and language learning that can arise when talking about Swedish in an international Nordic context. We flesh out the description with the help of a fictitious case in which two people from Sweden move to Finland. One has Swedish as the first language and the other has Swedish as a second language (and Finnish as the first). Both have decided to learn more Swedish during their stay in Finland. They live and study the first half year on Åland, the second in Helsinki and the third in Närpes, a small region of Finland. This fictitious case is realistic in the way that if the authors of this article were to move from Sweden to Finland, we would have this scenario. In this initial description, we use traditional terminology in terms of language learning, terms such as *first language*, *second language* and *foreign language*. While using this terminology, we will also reflect on the usefulness of these terms in the Finnish and Swedish contexts, being aware they don't have to be fully compatible with the different contexts.

## **6.2. The Finnish Swedish in Helsinki**

The question of whether Finnish Swedish in Helsinki can be learned as a second language is easier to answer, and the clear answer is no, and no matter which language the person has as the first language. The proportion who have Swedish as their first language falls steadily in Helsinki from having been about 20% in 1950 to 5.7% in 2017 (Statistikcentralen Finland, Befolkningen efter språk 1980-2018, 2020; Statistikcentralen Finland 2019, 2020). However, it is perhaps easier to argue that the Finnish Swedish in Helsinki is learned by migrants, more similar to a foreign language. At the same time, there are also circumstances that complicate the conclusion. One of these is that Swedish is a national language in Finland. The Finnish Constitution states "Finland's national language is Finnish and Swedish" (FINLEX. Självstyrelselag för Åland, 2020). Thus, no distinction is made between the Swedish Swedish and the Finnish Swedish in this context either. But learning Swedish as a foreign language may sound odd from a Swedish-Swedish perspective, because Swedish is both the majority language and the main language in Sweden. Therefore, let us look more carefully at the learning of the Finnish Swedish in Helsinki with the aid of our two fictional migrants from Sweden. Firstly, we can notice that none of them will learn Finnish Swedish as a second language as such a context is lacking in Helsinki where the big dominant national language is Finnish. Admittedly, there are environments where Swedish is used, but in most everyday situations it is necessary to be able to use Finnish, and Finnish Swedish speaking people in Helsinki are often bilingual, which the teachers in our interviews testified. This indicates then that anyone who has Swedish as a second language can continue their development of Swedish in Finland, but perhaps not as a foreign language, since the person has already learned Swedish as a second language in Sweden and Swedish in Finland is a national language, and because there are no contextual second language prerequisites for this. All this is also interesting when it comes to terminology of different kinds of language learning and as it seems there even might be a terminological gap in how to describe migrants learning of Finnish-Swedish in Helsinki. This could also be the case of describing the language learning of persons with Swedish Swedish as their first language.

## **6.3. Results of the interviews**

The language training center we visited in Helsinki is located in an area that can be characterized as a high status area. The other training centers we visited in Denmark, Norway and Sweden were located either in a suburban environment or in close proximity to industrial areas. The geosocial placement signals the value of the education, the status of the participants and how the subject itself is valued (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). In this light the Finnish Swedish in Finland, seems to have a higher status in comparison with Sweden Swedish as a second language in Sweden and Danish as a second language in Denmark and Norwegian as a second language in Norway. Another difference we have already mentioned is that in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, second language teaching takes place in a majority language context, while in Finland the corresponding language teaching takes place in a minority language context, although in some parts of Finland it also takes place in a local majority language context. Another aspect to keep in mind is that the Finnish Swedish can be seen as an asymmetric pluricentric national minority language in relation to the Swedish Swedish that is a majority language in Sweden.

Are there descriptions of complexity in the teacher's description of their teaching?

One of the questions the teachers had to answer was whether they considered they were teaching Swedish as a second language, Swedish as a foreign language or some other type of Swedish. It turned out to be a question they had never asked themselves nor reflected on. The teachers said that the question was completely new to them and that they had never thought about what kind of Swedish they teach and if it was a second language, a foreign language or something else. This could perhaps be taken as evidence of the opposite of complexity and that such a distinction was simply not needed. However, we shall return later to why this latter view may not be the case after all.

In contrast to the answers to the previous question the interviewed teachers gave a very detailed account of a number of other types of distinctions which, according to their own statement, they borrowed most of directly from Sweden. They also mentioned some differences to the Swedish organization of teaching, for example that instead of the three entrances for students with different educational backgrounds that exist in Sweden, they had several levels, including Swedish 1, 2, 3 and so on up to Swedish 14, where the number denotes the progression. The teachers, on the other hand, had no distinctions between different types of teaching and everything was called Swedish. Some examples are, Swedish language, Swedish for business, Swedish for citizenship, Swedish for parents, Swedish as an additional language, Swedish for migrants, Swedish for highly educated, Swedish for Finns etc. When language learning-based distinctions occurred in the interviews, they were always first introduced by the interviewing researchers. The teachers were then able to reason in more general terms about these distinctions, but didn't use them in their own spontaneous answers. This, too, could be interpreted as a sign of the absence of complexity. But we need to return to discuss this kind of interpretation and we will do it later on in this study.

On the other hand, when teachers were talking about teaching different categories of students, such as migrants and Finnish-speaking people, there appeared distinctions that made the contextual complexity of the language teaching in Helsinki evident. One of these, mentioned by our informants, was the term school Swedish, which the teachers jokingly translated to Finnish as "pakkoruotsi" (forced Swedish), that is, the Swedish that you learn in school if you are Finnish-speaking, including Swedish for Finnish-speaking persons in adult education in order to enable the persons to work in Swedish-speaking companies or for any other Swedish speaking environment. It is then telling for the language situation that the translation of school Swedish did not result in the literal and neutral translation "kouluruotsi" (school Swedish). The translation clearly refers to the debate about the position of Swedish language in Finland. In this case it is also relevant to mention, as we have already said before, that the number of Swedish speakers is constantly declining in Finland while the number of people with other minority languages is gradually increasing.

It seems then as if the teachers allow the Swedish Swedish in Sweden to have a superior position vis-à-vis Finnish Swedish in Finland, despite the obvious practical problems. In this context, it may also be important to keep in mind the size difference between the number of speakers of the Swedish Swedish in Sweden and Finnish Swedish in Finland is very large. A general impression is also that teachers exclusively use everyday words and concepts without any specific terms that can be identified by their linguistic form as vocational specific in their description of their subject, teaching, students or the context of learning. Even in questions that normally require terminological categorization, such as differences between second language and foreign language or designations for teaching materials and methods, there were hardly any

formulations that could be distinguished from a casual everyday language in a conversation in a middle-class environment. Of course, this does not mean that teachers' experience-based knowledge can be expected to be expressed in great terminological density in a conversation, nor that teachers would thereby lack an understanding of the phenomena that were discussed. But if we compare, for example, with the Swedish informants, however, there is a certain difference in this regard. This may, of course, to some extent be due to differences in local professional culture, which we cannot, however, assess in this study. But let's look at the differences.

Do language teachers use explicit professional terminology when they are describing their teaching?

With regard to our second question, the general answer must be a no, if the terms are to be explicit, thus in some way mark a difference to the general everyday concepts and be able to be linked to complexities in teaching asymmetrical pluricentric minority language in a transnational context. On the other hand, there are more general terms that can be linked to the language of teacher profession in general, for example, *exercises, lessons, documents, study visits, homework, grammar, word knowledge, dyslexia, educational paths, immigrants, Finnish, Swedish* and a number of terms that begin with *Swedish*. In this case, one would think that these results are hardly surprising and that we could get the same results if we examine teachers in Sweden or in other Nordic countries.

Let's then look at some examples from Sweden, Norway and Denmark. In many other respects, the language usage of language teachers teaching migrants, in case of common terms, was similar for our informants in all four countries. Some common, and not surprising, terms are *grammar, pronunciation, immigrants, illiteracy, integration, commitment* and *democracy*. With regard to terms for the subject itself, no terminological distinctions were made in the Danish and Norwegian material of the type of *majority language, minority language, second language* or *foreign language*, neither in the interviews nor during the observations. In this respect, the material from Denmark and Norway is similar to the teachers' way of talking about their subject in Finland. This is interesting, partly because the context for teaching in these countries is completely opposite to Finland, when it comes to the distinction between *minority* and *majority*. Danish in Denmark and Norwegian in Norway are majority languages, while Finnish Swedish in Finland is a small minority language. The situation in Norway differs from Denmark because there are two main varieties of Norwegian, Bokmål and Nynorska. However, our material from Norway refers to the majority variety, which means that we can speak about majority language even in this case. In the case of the Swedish teachers, on the other hand, it can be noted that distinctions such as *second language* and *majority language* was used. In this case, the Swedish material thus differs. Denmark and Finland have the largest mutual differences regarding context in that the Danish is the exclusive majority language and as such also the second language in Denmark, while the Finnish Swedish is a small minority language and hardly constitutes a context for second language learning. It is in this regard very interesting that the way of talking about the subject (and also the teaching) was most similar to each other in our material. One example of this is that all language teaching is referred to as Danish and Swedish. Also the teaching of the Danish and Finnish teachers was most similar, for example traditional teacher dominated IRE – conversation pattern. The teachers in Sweden and Finland, in turn, show the biggest differences between each other both in terms of how teachers talk about their subjects and the style of teaching. This is of course interesting since the teachers in Finland stated that the textbooks, teaching materials and terminology were borrowed from

Sweden. We shall return to what kind of interpretations of this we can do with a focus on the Finnish Swedish in Helsinki in relation to the Swedish Swedish in Sweden. But let's first take a closer look at the teaching observed in Finland.

#### *How can teachers' teaching be characterized?*

With regard to the teaching of Finnish Swedish in Helsinki, a predominantly monolingual and foreign language like teaching is evident in our observations, which thus harmonizes with the impression from the interviews where everything is referred to solely as Swedish. Also, during our observations we could not see any use of the participants first languages, for example code switching, everything was only Swedish. One of the observed lessons could be characterized as typical old fashion foreign language teaching with the main focus on grammar and multiple choice questions. During the second lesson there was also the use of digital technology in the form of image and sound, but no other language than Swedish were present, except on two occasions when the teacher gave a Finnish Swedish equivalent to a Swedish Swedish expression in the textbook. On both occasions, the teaching can be characterized as rather similar to a traditional foreign language teaching with few elements of participant initiated activities. One of the lessons observed also contained group activities but the teacher engagement was also in these cases a rigid monolingual IRE. If we then compare our observations of teaching Danish in Copenhagen in Denmark, we can see clear similarities between the Finnish and Danish teachers, such as monolingual teaching, only Danish is used, participants first language is not used, focus on grammar, and IRE structured teacher dialogs (Do you have a job? Yes, I have. Good!) in the oral parts, and also when working in small groups.

One can thus note that the Danish teaching is very similar to the one we have described with regard to the teaching of Finnish Swedish in Finland. What appears to be similar when we compare teachers' descriptions of their teaching in Copenhagen and Helsinki is the lack of expressions of different kinds of language teaching. The Danish teaching could be characterized as a foreign language teaching, except that the context is typical second language majority context and the same goes for the Finnish-Swedish teaching, except that the context this time is a minority language context. This is the kind of teaching that is detached from the context. The fact that one cannot see any consequences of the differences in context may look remarkable at first sight but let us try to figure out what kind of conclusions can be drawn from this and the other observations made so far.

## **7. Conclusion**

If we then acknowledge that terminology is at the core of professional thinking and communication (Ge & Chen, 2018), it seems that what the teachers in Helsinki can say and do is restricted by the lack of professional terminology suited to their unique complex contextual situation because the general terms they use provides only an undifferentiated account of the Finnish Swedish as a subject and of the context of the teaching. Adhering to a simple empirical principle based on explicit occurrences of terms in teachers answers this kind of conclusion can be reasonable. The choice of decontextualized teaching style is also intelligible and congruent with the situation of a great complexity that which you simply have to disregard not to be completely overpowering for the teachers. This is also, in line with what teachers said about the workload and shortage of time. One can of course also ask if it is even realistic to expect this kind of effort from the teachers, because it both requires a distancing from the everyday teaching and talking and a



theoretical understanding of the contextual complexity and the time and energy for developing methodologies and practical tools that can take advantage of the unique affordances of the local situation in teaching instead of merely surviving it. There certainly is support for this kind of explanations of why teachers talk and teach as they do. But some reservations still apply here, namely that our current study is small and we cannot draw any certain conclusions. There could be teachers who have done all the things we suggested, but this should on the other hand be studied more thoroughly in a larger study. Another and perhaps even more important methodological objection is that although teachers appear to lack a differentiated terminology, they can still have a practical awareness of the state of things and their current choice of strategy is well grounded from their point of view. It may also be the case that the more explicit consciousness of the situation may be under development. There are actually signs that suggest both the existence of the silent knowledge of complexity and its possible development towards a terminology that is able to express it. One of these signs could be spotted when the interviewers request a terminological clarification at the end of the interview and it makes teachers more or less immediately aware of their need for more reflection on the issue. When terms, second language and foreign language are included in one of the questions, the teachers immediately responded that the question was more complex than a simple choice between the two and for the moment too difficult to put into words.

Thus, if what we said about teachers talk, teaching and the motifs for it have credibility then it also turned out that the complexity that we have already discussed in our description of the Finnish Swedish as a complex asymmetric pluricentric national minority language is confirmed by teachers' obvious difficulties in naming their subject with locally adequate terminology. Because of this general difficulty, teachers for the moment lack terminological tools for reflecting more thoroughly on their teaching and the complexity of their subject and also tools to communicate this understanding. This kind of interpretation also agrees with what Ge and Chen (2018) says, namely that terms are tools for professional thinking and that they are the core of professional communication. The teachers we met in Helsinki thus seem to lack for their situation fully adapted professional tools for thinking and communicating how to teach Finnish Swedish as asymmetrical pluricentric national minority language in the context of dominating Finnish language and dominating Swedish Swedish as a very powerful neighbor. However, this should not be interpreted as if the teachers are not professional in many other respects. Among other things, this became clear in our observations of their teaching, which was characterized, among other things, by the effective use of digital resources and their awareness of the problems of using Swedish teaching materials because there are no textbooks in Finnish Swedish. Thus, it is clear that the teachers of Finnish Swedish in Finland have a dilemma between the local needs and the available means and strategies for teaching leading to the simplification strategy which is similar to that in Denmark that have the most simplified majority language context among the four Nordic countries in our study.

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