

Chapter 2

Southern Saami Language and Culture—Between Stigma and Pride, Tradition and Modernity



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Abstract In this chapter, I will present an analysis of how a Southern Sámi identity is performed in our late modern society, first and foremost how this identity is expressed through the use—or omittance—of the Southern Sámi language. It has been pointed out that it is more or less a miracle that Southern Sámi is still a living language. In my chapter, I will try to demonstrate how some sociocultural and political factors through history have inhibited the use of this language, while other factors have supported—directly or indirectly—the transmission of this linguistic repertoire from one generation to another. The master story of the Southern Sámi language and culture is intimately connected to the general ‘climate of opinion’ when it comes to minority–majority relations in Norway. The position of the Sámi population today has in several ways been fundamentally changed, compared with how the Sámi were regarded by the Norwegian majority population well into the twentieth century, as a lesser and inferior people. Some of the main aspects of my analysis will be related to contrasts like stigma versus pride, tradition versus modernity—as these values are attached to the Sámi culture.

Iktedimmi Daennie tjaalegisnie sijthem aktem goerehtimmiem áehpiedehtedh guktie saemien identiteete lea váajnoes mijjen minngemes daajbaaletje siebriedahkesne, uvtemes guktie identiteete lea váajnoes átnoen tjírrh—jallh ij átnoen tjírrh, saemien gieleste. Tjiertestamme nov lea badth naa onterligs jih sjiere áarjelsaemien akte jielijje giele annje. Mov tjaalegisnie sijthem pryövedh vuesiehtidh guktie sáemies sosiokultuvrelle jih politihkeles faktovrh histovrijen tjírrh leah átnoem gieleste heerredamme, mearan jeatjah faktovrh leah gielesertiestimmiem däärjoehtamme- ryöktsth jallh ovryöktsth—aktede boelveste dan mábpan. Áejviehistovrije saemien gielen jih kultuvren bijre lea lihke viedteldahkesne dan siejhme vuajnose unnebeláhkoenjenebeláhkoen bijre Nöörjesne. Saemien árhoji sijjie siebriedahkesne lea gelielaakan tjarke jarkelamme, viertiestamme dejnie aarebi vuajnojne maam nöörjen

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jienebelåhkoe utni saemiej bijre guhkiem 1900-låhkoen; goh unnebe jih unnebevyõrtogs almetjh. Naakenh dejstie vihkielommes bielijste mov analysjesne sæjhta vuestiebieliej bijre årroth goh skaamoe garmeresvoeten vööste, aerpievuekie daajbaaletjen vööste—juktie daah aarvoeh leah saemien kultuvrese ektiedamme.

The fact that the Southern Sámi language has survived at all in the close millenary neighbourhood of Scandinavian might seem to be a miracle. (Bergsland 1998: 45)

Modern life is moving closer and closer in on us, and the Saami language can't withstand that. (Matti Aikio 1919, after Minde 2002: 19)

2.1 Introduction

The two vignette quotes above set the tone for this chapter by leading us directly to the two main themes to be addressed. The first is the fact that the Southern Saami language has survived, almost against all odds, raising the question as to which historical, political and socio-cultural factors have been effective and resulted in a development that is surprising in many ways. We are talking about the types of factors that promote, or alternatively inhibit, the continued use of a minority language. Second, we will look more closely at some key aspects of being Southern Saami, or Saami generally, in a modern world. These factors actually affect the framework of what is accepted as 'Saami' in our late modern age. What are the limits for what is recognized as legitimate cultural expression within a Saami repertoire? And what represents a potential threat to Saami culture and identity?

The two themes are closely linked in several ways. A common thread in this chapter is the socio-cultural *indexicality* of being Southern Saami, that is, how the Southern Saami language as well as other Southern Saami cultural expressions is assigned a particular signal value, thus achieving a symbolic position within a given social community. The first theme concerns factors that inhibit or promote the use of a minority language and is primarily historical, in the sense that essential aspects of the Southern Saami's language history are laid out. The second theme builds on this historical overview, while bringing key dimensions of the past into the future. How should this cultural heritage be conducted in our time?

2.2 Southern Saami Language—A Fragile Fabric

Based on what we know today about language death as an accelerating global phenomenon, there is little doubt that Southern Saami is almost a priori in a highly vulnerable position. It is a language linked to a minority group that is actually a minority *within* the minority. In terms of a general linguistic-based assessment,

Magga (2000) estimates that Southern Saami is between steps 7 and 8 on Fishman's (1991) eight-step scale for assessing the degree of threat, which means that he considers the language to be very vulnerable. By comparison, he places Lule Saami at step 6, and Northern Saami at step 4.

The extent to which the older generation transmits a language to the younger generation is the primary criterion that can be used as an indicator of how threatened a minority language actually is. In other words, the question is to what extent children experience a 'natural', generational socialization into the minority language. Often this factor is pointed out as the most essential aspect of minority language vitality. Based on this criterion, plus the size of the minority population, minority groups are often classified under the categories 'moribund', or dying, 'endangered' and 'safe' (see Krauss 1992: 4).

Bearing this in mind, let us take a quick look at the language situation in the Southern Saami area of Norway (which, as far as we know, is very similar to the adjoining Swedish region). To what extent is this minority language transmitted in a natural, generational matter, for example? No one has in fact ever conducted a comprehensive and all-encompassing linguistic investigation in the Southern Saami communities that could provide the grounds for more precise answers to this type of question. However, we can obtain some general indications from a mapping study conducted by the Southern Saami cultural centre Sijti Jarne in Hattfjelldal municipality in the late 1980s, about a generation ago (see Engen and Kulbrandstad 2004: 120ff., and also Todal 2006, which reviews a mapping study conducted in 2000). The result that stands out is the significant difference between the oldest and youngest age groups. This study found that among people over 50 years of age, approximately three out of four states that they can speak Southern Saami, whereas only one out of four in the youngest age group reports the same. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the two youngest age groups states that they know 'some' Saami.

It is worth noting a number of reservations that must be observed with this type of result. These include how representative the informant selection is relative to the total Southern Saami population, and not least how the various informants may have interpreted the response options in the survey. At the same time, it is important to point out that this survey from the late 1980s shows us a demographic pattern in Southern Saami language competence that is highly plausible. A consistent characteristic of processes that put a minority language under pressure from a majority language is primarily how the oldest generation maintains the minority language, while competence gradually decreases the further down the age groups one goes. A study conducted among young people who had been learning Southern Saami as a second language in school (Todal 1998) also shows that the minority language was their home language to only a minimal degree. Although more than half of the parents reported speaking Southern Saami well, only a small minority used it in communicating with their own children.

Besides the general tendency for more older than younger speakers to have a command of Southern Saami, it is obvious that maintaining this minority language is something that has mainly been managed internally in certain families. In practice, this means that in *some* families the transmission of Southern Saami has been strong,

and in these settings, both the parent generation and the children can have a relatively high level of proficiency in the minority language—even today in the twenty-first century. In other families, however, the generational transmission of the language has broken down, in some cases relatively recently and in others two to three generations ago (see, e.g. Jansson 2003; Mæhlum 2004a, b for further discussion).

How, then, should we interpret the developments that have taken place? What factors have contributed to this once widely used communication medium among the Southern Saami more or less falling out of use? And just as important to consider are the conditions that have *reinforced* the use of this minority language and resulted in what Bergsland (1998) refers to as something approaching a miracle (see the vignette quotation above).

2.3 Ethnolinguistic Vitality

Majority languages are powerful because they have the power to recommend themselves through their political, economic and social status. Minority languages, on the other hand, represent more alternative and “soft” value systems that often emphasize cultural awareness and ethnic origin. In the age of globalization and modernity, minority language speakers worldwide live in language contact situations that are characterized by different and competing value sets. (Johansen 2009: 2)

A number of models have been developed in linguistics that attempt to systematize many factors that have proven significant in terms of strengthening or weakening the preservation of minority languages. Here, we will use the *ethnolinguistic vitality model* (Giles et al. 1977) as our point of departure in the analysis of Southern Saami language and culture. The term ‘ethnolinguistic vitality’ expresses a mental power and will within a minority group—a form of consciousness and energy that helps to keep the minority together as a group. High, or strong, vitality thus makes it likely that the minority language can be maintained, whereas low or weak vitality is more likely to result in a linguistic shift to the majority language (Fig. 2.1).

A key aspect of the model, as presented by Giles et al. (1977), is that it is a descriptive taxonomy for analysing the connection between language, ethnicity and interethnic relations. Neither this model, nor any other serious model for that matter, is thus able to predict the outcome of any given language contact situations. This is simply a way to systematize potentially relevant factors without weighting them in any way.

Let us take a closer look at what the historical situation has been for the Southern Saami minority, with particular emphasis on the situation in Norway. To start with, the three main categories in the classification of Giles et al. (1977)—*Status, Demography* and *Institutional Support*—frame the structure of this presentation (for more in-depth analyses in accordance with this model, see Johansen 2006: 43ff; Mæhlum 2007: 138ff).

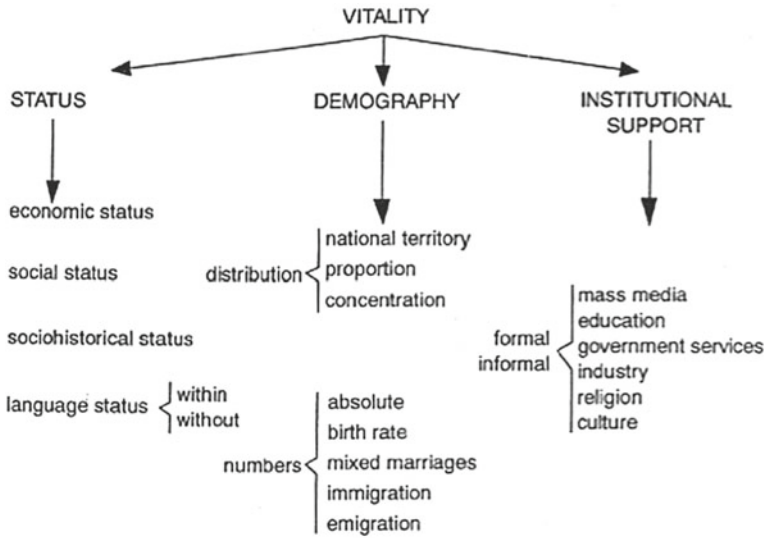


Fig. 2.1 Taxonomy of factors influencing ethnolinguistic vitality (after Giles et al. 1977)

2.4 Status

Southern Saami people and culture, like all other Saami culture, have long been assigned an inferior and in many ways marginal position in the greater Norwegian community—economically, socially, culturally and consequently, also linguistically. In short, being Saami in Norway was stigmatized. Actions and policies throughout the 1800s laid much of the foundation for this marginalization and stigmatization. Later in the century, the conventional outlook, especially on the part of various authorities, gradually evolved to regard the Saami as representing a lower development stage than the majority Norwegian population. Within this ideology, the Saami population was considered to be a weak, degenerate, infantile and dying race; a race that could only be rescued by becoming ‘Norwegianized’—in other words, assimilated—so that their members could be lifted up to a higher cultural level. Starting in the second half of the 1800s, a general acceptance of Social Darwinism ideals upheld and reinforced this racial hierarchy, both in Norway and elsewhere in the Western world. According to this conceptual framework, the Saami were a ‘nature people’ and by virtue of this found themselves at a lower level of cultural sophistication and civilization than the rest of Norway’s population (see, e.g. Eriksen and Niemi 1981; Mæhlum 2007, with various references).

This prolonged and systematic stigmatization of the Saami people and their culture was naturally influential in shaping the attitudes and stereotypes that developed in the wider Norwegian society. These stereotypes portrayed the Saami as old-fashioned and reactionary, beggarly and verging on culturally backward. The Saami language came to be seen as one of the foremost symbolic expressions of belonging to what

was perceived to be an inferior and anachronistic culture. Within this horizon of understanding, using the Norwegian language was seen as better suited to meeting the needs of a modern world. In this way, Norwegian functioned as a symbolic admission ticket to social and economic progress in the broader community, while continued use of the Saami language—more than anything else—expressed a person’s inability to keep up with ‘progress’. One consequence of all of these ideas was that the Saami language and culture were increasingly relegated to the private sphere, and as much as possible kept hidden from the public arena. A consequence of a slightly different nature was that many parents began to doubt the value of teaching their children Saami at all. ‘What’s the point in having such a language? Soon no one will be speaking it anymore anyway’, became the refrain of many Saami.

The infantilization and general denigration of Saami people and culture that prevailed represent a palpable parallel to the conventional representation of the ‘other’ within a European colonialist ideology. We are familiar with these mechanisms from Edward Saïd’s (1978) concept of *Orientalism*; the term’s validity can be extended to various forms of internal colonialism. Just such a form of internal colonialism of the Saami minority took place in Norway for an extended period of time. This occurred in its organized and official form through a number of assimilation measures undertaken by the Norwegian authorities from the mid-1800s until at least 1980. In reality, a subtle form of ethnic cleansing took place that resulted in many Saami people eventually choosing to deny or renounce their ethnic origin. Many considered the burden of being Saami within the Norwegian national state to be too great to bear.

One factor stands out as especially important to the status of the Southern Saami language. Until just a few decades ago, this was exclusively a *spoken* variety. The language had been written down in the nineteenth century, but only for scientific purposes. In 1957, the first book for Southern Saami was published—a small Southern Saami reading book with Northern Saami orthography (see Bergsland and Hasselbrink 1957). But it took until 1978 for Norway to approve a separate and special Southern Saami standard for textbooks, developed by Professor Knut Bergsland and teacher Ella Holm Bull. The codification of Southern Saami as its own written language served as a crucial symbolic act and laid the foundation for a qualitative status elevation of the Southern Saami language. With this codification, the prerequisites were in place to develop a modern written culture in Southern Saami. Progress in this arena to date has primarily been in textbook publications—and initially also connected to the recent decades of revitalization measures (see the section on *Institutional Support* below).

As we have seen, the different status factors in the ethnolinguistic vitality model have traditionally and consistently disfavoured the Southern Saami, in terms of their social status, sociohistorical status and linguistic status. Historically, the conditions in a number of fundamental areas have thus been extremely uncondusive to developing strong ethnolinguistic vitality within the Southern Saami minority population. One status factor has an ambiguous and almost paradoxical function, however. This is the reindeer industry, which is linked to economic status. Reindeer husbandry has traditionally served as a sustainable economic foundation for a large part of the Saami population and has been particularly strong in the Southern Saami area. Since

the 1880s, reindeer herding has been exclusively an ethnic industry, reserved for the Saami population within the regulated reindeer husbandry areas. Although economic status among the Southern Saami is more differentiated today, the reindeer industry is still an important and vital identity factor within the Southern Saami community. But reindeer husbandry also has a prominent identifying function in the Norwegian majority community. Just belonging to a livelihood that is so strongly linked to a traditional pre-modern form of nature utilization has contributed to the attributes that have been assigned to Saami culture, such as ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘uncivilized’ (see above). The Saami have consistently been regarded as ‘nature’ people who, in the eyes of some individuals, are seen as an anachronism in a late modern world.

The paradox here is that the very thing that has so greatly contributed to marginalizing and stigmatizing Saami culture in wider modern society serves as an identity factor that has strengthened ethnolinguistic vitality *within* Saami communities. This particular form of economic specialization has proven to be an important focus of identity for many minority groups (see, e.g. Adams 1981: 9; Hyltenstam and Stroud 1991: 98). In such cases, the industry not only provides an important source of income but also carries a kind of representative function for the minority in question—that is, it serves as a social and cultural symbol. This context provides the necessary backdrop for understanding how the reindeer industry is a Saami occupational specialty that can function as a cultural shield, as some would formulate it (Aarseth 1982: 3). As has been the case in the Northern Saami area, reindeer husbandry has served to consolidate the Southern Saami group identity overall—thus strengthening the use of the minority language.

2.5 Demography

Three of the demographic factors in the vitality model are particularly relevant for the situation in the Southern Saami region. Two of them—population size and settlement pattern—likely contribute to weakening ethnolinguistic vitality, while the third factor—marriage practices—represents an unquestionable confirmation and strengthening of a distinct Southern Saami identity.

As we have already acknowledged, the Southern Saami comprises a small minority group not only in Norway and Sweden but also globally. The official figures vary a great deal here, but according to estimates made in recent years, the Southern Saami population in Norway is generally considered to be about 1000 individuals, with roughly the same number in Sweden. If, like Krauss (1992: 7), we estimate 100,000 language users to be a reasonable lower limit for what can be considered a ‘safe’ language, Southern Saami is definitely in the high-risk group. The lack of geographical concentration—the second demographic factor—has contributed at least as much to placing the Southern Saami minority in a particularly vulnerable position. Southern Saami, both in Norway and Sweden, live widely scattered across a significant geographical area, with only hints of concentrated populations in certain areas. This absence of a core geographical area reinforces the problems inherent in small pop-

ulation groups. However, minority groups that are relatively concentrated within a defined geographical area, such as language islands or ghettos, generally have better conditions for maintaining the minority language (see, e.g. Kloss 1966; Hyltenstam and Stroud 1991: 90). This factor could help explain why the Lule Saami language seems to be somewhat stronger than Southern Saami (see Magga's assessment of this above).

The demographic component that undoubtedly strengthens Southern Saami vitality, and thus also directly influences the language situation, is the tradition of endogamy. The Southern Saami has traditionally married one another to a great degree, a practice that seems to have been particularly strong in families making a living from reindeer husbandry. This factor has in fact neutralized some of the negative effects on vitality caused by the other two demographic conditions.

2.6 Institutional Support

Since the mid-1900s, there has been growing recognition that *without* varied forms of official, institutional support, linguistic minority groups like the Saami will face even greater problems in our late modern society. Institutional support in the education and media sectors, plus certain administrative areas, has proven to be decisive in maintaining minority languages. The government-appointed Saami Committee presented recommendations in 1959 that laid the basic foundation for this mindset in Norway (see, e.g. Stordahl 2000). This report affirmed that Saami culture could not continue to exist without making a separate space for what is Saami, across economic, social, cultural and administrative realms. The period since 1960 has largely been characterized by the struggle to establish this space (see, e.g. the establishment of the Saami Parliament in 1989 and the introduction of the Saami language Act in 1992).

Radical changes in the institutional conditions for the Saami language and culture overall have taken place in a relatively short period of time. However, it is important to point out that many of these measures—above all explicitly linguistic ones—have primarily benefitted the Northern Saami. In a number of public contexts, 'Saami' tends to be perceived and treated as Northern Saami, which is the *de facto* majority-Saami language code. However, Northern Saami and Southern Saami need to be regarded as two different languages, where the users of each language usually do not understand the other.

Here, we will only briefly refer to two institutional conditions that, in part, have been and could become vital for the language situation within the Southern Saami minority. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been boarding schools in the Southern Saami area that are specifically for Southern Saami children. This is a form of institutional support we would expect could have strengthened the language situation, except for the fact that mission organizations ran the schools. The oldest of these boarding schools, located in Havika in Nord-Trøndelag (from 1910 to 1951), was run by the so-called *Finnemisjon* (Saami mission), which had

as its primary objective to integrate Saami children into a Christian, Norwegian-majority culture (see Devik 1980). Thus, the Havika boarding school functioned in many ways as a regular institution for Norwegianizing children—at least in the linguistic realm—as did the state-run boarding schools in the Northern Saami area that were created in the 1900s. However, with the establishment of the boarding school in Hattfjelldalen in 1951 and the Saami school at Snåsa in 1968, this explicit assimilation policy was abandoned (see Jacobsen 1982; Holm Bull 1982). Both of these schools have undoubtedly played a pivotal role in revitalizing the ethnic awareness and competence of Southern Saami children, and sending the children to these boarding schools remained a strong tradition throughout the Southern Saami area until at least the early 2000s.

The one institutional factor that more than any other could have a decisive impact on the Southern Saami language situation is the inclusion of—for now—four Southern Saami municipalities in the Saami administrative district: Snåase/Snåsa (2008), Raarvihke/Røyrvik (2013), Aarborte/Hattfjelldal (2017) and Plaassje/Røros (2018). Legally speaking, Southern Saami is an official language alongside Norwegian in these four communities, and the four municipalities are officially bilingual. Given that Southern Saami has traditionally been a spoken language used primarily in the private sphere, this change in formal status could no doubt have great symbolic and practical significance.

2.7 Saami Identity Management—Between Tradition and Modernity

As the Saami author Matti Aikio expressed in the early 1900s, ‘Modern life is moving closer and closer in on us, and the Saami language can’t withstand that encroachment’ (1919, after Minde 2002). If we are to interpret Aikio literally, ‘Saami’ and ‘modern’ represent irreconcilable opposites. This inherent conflict has represented one of the major challenges for most of the Saami culture building that has occurred in recent decades. The following theoretical reflections are thus as relevant for the Saami population in general as for the Southern Saami specifically.

One of the most prominent dilemmas in the encounter between Saami minority culture and Norwegian majority culture has revolved around the limits for what should be accepted as ‘Saami’. What cultural expressions are tolerated as legitimate within a Saami cultural repertoire, and what represents a threat to Saami culture and identity? Being Saami has been something that many Saami have had to actively take a position on throughout much of their lives—both *whether* they want to be Saami and if so, *how* they will manage a Saami identity. The backdrop for this is, above all, that the limits for shaping one’s identity and combining social roles are often far narrower within a minority culture than one normally experiences in a majority society (see, e.g. Stordahl 1998).

Many of the most typical Saami identity dilemmas are undoubtedly closely related to the symbolic values traditionally associated with the Saami, both in the wider Norwegian community and among the Saami themselves. As we have seen, key parts of Saami culture are still based on a traditionalist, pre-modern cultural heritage, where utilization of and interaction with nature are supporting elements. The foremost symbol of this connection is unquestionably reindeer herding. The relationship between Saami and Norwegian as minority and majority culture, respectively, exemplifies a number of the conflicts that are often associated with the encounter between a pre-modern civilization on the one hand, and a high-modern or late-modern society on the other. As the majority Norwegian society has become strongly industrialized, urbanized and generally modernized in recent generations, there is a risk that the traditional Saami economic foundation may be considered as an anomaly and an anachronism. The conflicts have therefore been numerous and long-lasting. The greater community's economic exploitation of nature—in terms of, for example, industrial development and power development—has often come into sharp conflict with the Saamis' more traditional livelihood. The larger community has put continuous pressure on the Saamis' ability to manoeuvre, and in this way often reinforced the experience of Saami culture as something truly 'outdated'.

These are some of the essential assumptions that we need to see as the backdrop when the question arises as to what will happen to Saami language and culture in general, and the Southern Saami language and culture in particular. The Saami minority faces challenges that are in many ways like a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the majority community exerts continuous pressure on the Saami, explicitly and implicitly, to adapt to the larger society's lifestyle. But adapting represents a potential threat to some of the most important—and iconic—Saami activities and values. Changing or reducing traditional Saami activities *too* radically risks undermining and perhaps completely eliminating a supporting element of traditional Saami culture. On the other hand, there has been a strong tendency in certain Saami communities to try to *shield* themselves from some of the influences and demands of modern society. This strategy has in turn often resulted in rather orthodox notions of what constitutes 'real' and 'pure' Saaminess, linking the idea of being Saami to a strictly and traditionally defined cultural heritage; see the discussion of such thoughts in Stordahl (1998, 158): 'The Saami society that is present today [...] is a kind of remnant of something original, a remnant that we must either save or must realize will disappear'. Within this kind of framework, newer and more modern cultural expressions tend to be regarded as 'un-Saami' in the sense that they represent cultural elements that are perceived as belonging exclusively to the majority culture and are therefore difficult to integrate into Saami culture.

An interview with some Saami women who are not linked to traditional Saami industries provides a striking example of these mechanisms (see Daerpies Dierie 2000, 9). One of these women states that she is unable to be a Saami for more than an hour a day. On the other hand, she regards herself as a *pc-Saami* or *office-job Saami*, which is obviously incompatible with being a 'proper' or 'full-time' Saami.

This picture of the Saami as being 'genuine' and 'authentic'—and thus traditional—essentializes the minority culture, while the majority culture represents what is

modern. A key part of this view is the belief that these two cultural polarities are by definition difficult to integrate. This attitude has been prevalent in Southern Saami culture in the linguistic realm, articulated as a form of rigid *purism* (see Johansen 2006, 94ff). Until quite recently, the widespread position among many Southern Saami was that, to the extent that people used the Southern Saami language at all, they had to master it—preferably perfectly. Many older individuals, notably language-proficient ones, have thus acted as a kind of ‘language police’ within the communities. As a result, many language users, especially young people, became reluctant to use the language for fear of speaking incorrectly. The attitude has simply been that it is better not to speak the language at all than to destroy it by using it with less than native-like proficiency. Of course, the result was particularly unfavourable for linguistic socialization, but at the same time this is a well-known practice in a number of minority contexts (see, e.g. Dorian 1994).

Staking out a ‘sustainable’ balancing act in the cultural minefield we have outlined here would appear to be the major challenge for conducting Saami identity in the future. On the one hand, a strictly traditionalist and hyper-puristic view of what qualifies as ‘real’ Saami risks reflecting an out-of-date and anachronistic culture that is isolated and marginalized relative to the rest of Norwegian society. On the other hand, eagerly ‘upgrading’ and ‘modernizing’ Saami culture by constantly integrating new cultural elements runs the risk of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In that case, Saami culture no longer remains an integral part of Norwegian culture, but becomes fully assimilated—and thus lost. However, finding a *modus vivendi* somewhere between these extremes would reduce concerns about the future, both for the Saami language and culture generally and for Southern Saami language and culture in particular.

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