

Projections for Sámi in Norway: Schools as Key to Revitalization

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Abstract

Based on the contemporary number of children receiving instruction in Sámi in the compulsory part of the Norwegian school system (grades 1–10), the paper presents three different projections of the future number of Sámi language users in Norway. There exist three different curricula for the subject Sámi, one for first language pupils (Sámi 1), one for second language pupils (Sámi 2), and one for pupils with no previous knowledge of the language (Sámi 3). Depending on whether only Sámi 1 pupils become future language users, or also Sámi 2 or even Sámi 3 pupils do so, a sober, moderate, and optimistic prognosis can be made, respectively. The sober prognosis predicts a dramatic decrease for North Sámi, a slight decrease for Lule Sámi, and status quo for South Sámi, whereas the moderate prognosis predicts status quo for North Sámi and an increase for Lule and South Sámi, and the optimistic prognosis predicts an increase for all three varieties, but most notably for Lule and South Sámi. A number of factors that are likely to modulate the prognoses are brought to attention and discussed, unveiling that more information is needed regarding a number of issues that bear on how the future of the Sámi languages in Norway can be estimated.

Keywords: Sámi languages, revitalization, Sámi in Norway, language vitality

1. Introduction

In this paper, estimates of the future population of Sámi language users in Norway are made on the basis of the current number of pupils receiving instruction in one of the Sámi languages. This is rooted in the assumption that literacy is one of the most powerful factors in the language ecology of contemporary Sámi and that the school system is a very efficient tool for advancing literacy and language proficiency in the Sámi languages. Other factors are also important to take into consideration when assessing the vitality of a language, and the school-based prognoses must inevitably be integrated in a broader model where a range of factors modulate the total number of language users.

The Sámi languages are indigenous to the High North of Europe. The traditional homelands of the Sámi are the central and northern parts of Norway and Sweden, the northern part of Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The North Sámi autonym for this area is Sápmi, and variants of this name are used in other Sámi languages.¹ This paper will be confined to an assessment of Sámi in Norway for which we have exact figures regarding the number of pupils with Sámi language instruction and furthermore where we also have adequate knowledge about the curricula used. Whether the method can be extended to other areas of Sápmi remains to be seen.

The structure of the paper is as follows. We start by presenting some figures regarding the present-day number of speakers/users of the Sámi languages in general. We then hone in on the three varieties currently in use in Norway and their status in the Norwegian educational system. On the basis of the numbers presented, a set of prognoses is put forth and discussed before aspects of a broader model to assess the future of the Sámi languages in Norway are taken into consideration.

¹ The spelling ‘Saami’ is frequently encountered in English texts and used for instance by both Ethnologue and the Endangered Languages Project. In the present text we use ‘Sámi’ with accent aigu on the root vowel which better reflects the spelling used in several of the Sámi languages themselves.



2. The Sámi languages: facts and figures

2.1 Number of users

The Sámi languages constitute a separate group within the Uralic language family. The language group makes up a dialect continuum in which nine different main varieties are recognized as living languages today. Table 1 lists them from northeast to southwest with number of speakers as currently (April, 2022) given by *Ethnologue* and the *Endangered Languages Project* (ELP), respectively.

Language	# speakers Ethnologue	# speakers ELP
Ter Sámi (RU)	2	30
Kildin Sámi (RU)	600	~300
Skolt Sámi (RU, FI)	320	~300
Inari Sámi (FI)	300	~300
North Sámi (FI, NO, SE)	25,700	16,500
Lule Sámi (NO, SE)	2,000	1-2,000
Pite Sámi (SE)	20	~42
Ume Sámi (SE)	20	<20
South Sámi (NO, SE)	600	600

Table 1: Number of speakers of Sámi languages according to Ethnologue and the Endangered Languages Project

There are a few obvious discrepancies between the figures in the two databases, which presumably is due to the fact they may use slightly different sources which to varying degree may be updated. The definition of ‘speaker of language x’ may also vary considerably across sources and researchers, from counting just native, first language users to also including individuals with only partial knowledge of the language. Official registers of language users do not exist in all of the four countries, and notably not in Norway which hosts the highest number of ethnic Sámi. Furthermore, we also see that the ELP figures are somewhat approximate. In fact, the ELP provides alternative sources for their figures while at the same time assessing the certainty of each of them, and the ones given in Table 1 are those assessed to be most certain.^{2, 3}

What is nevertheless unquestionable is the following: North Sámi has far more speakers/users than all of the other varieties combined with about 85–90% of the total Sámi speaker/user population. Whereas North Sámi is considered *vulnerable* by the ELP, all the other varieties are considered *endangered* to varying degrees. As a whole the Sámi languages are presumably the most threatened historical minority language group in all of Europe with its total number of speakers at best being about 30,000, possibly just about 20,000.

Crucially, due to a long period of explicit assimilation policies in all four nation states that divide up Sápmi, there has been a breach in inter-generational transmission of the language in many local communities (see e.g. Mínde 2003, Trosterud 2008, Albury 2016 and references cited there). A consequence of this is that there are currently many people with a Sámi ethnic identity and/or ancestry who have little or no command of one of the Sámi languages. Pietikäinen, Huss, Laihiala-Kankainen, Aikio-Puoskari, & Lane (2010:4) estimate the total Sámi population to be between 140,000 and 200,000. In other words, only some 10–20% of all ethnic Sámi are speakers of a Sámi language. Rasmussen (2017:43) estimates the number of ethnic Sámi in Norway to be at least 100,000, which, as we will see below, gives a similar ratio of language users to ethnic members.

² The source for the estimated 16,500 users of North Sámi is considered 100% certain by the ELP. However, they also cite another source with the estimate 25,700 as a 100% certain, but this source (Kejonen 2020) in turn cites the figure given in Ethnologue as but one of several estimates provided in the literature.

³ A reviewer points out that the estimated 300 users of Inari Sámi most likely refers to the pre-revitalization stage and that the current number can be taken to be about 450 users of this variety of Sámi, see Olthuis et al. 2021: 178).

2.2 *The Sámi languages in Norway*

In June 1990, Norway was the first state to ratify the ILO 169 convention on indigenous and tribal nations, and Norway recognizes the Sámi as an indigenous historical minority of the country. Furthermore, by §108 of the Norwegian constitution, Norwegian authorities are obliged to facilitate the development of Sámi language, culture, and way of life. Additionally, North, Lule and South Sámi are also recognized as indigenous languages of Norway by the Norwegian State under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Ethnologue estimates the number of users in Norway to be 20,000 for North Sámi, 1,000 for Lule Sámi, and 300 for South Sámi. The figure for North Sámi is most likely too high and seems to be a confusion of users in Norway and in all of Sápmi as 20,000 is given by several sources as the total number of North Sámi users.⁴ The lowest estimate for North Sámi in the ELP is based on Salminen (2007:262) who says that “[i]n Norway, the number of speakers is above 10,000, in Sweden perhaps 5,000, and in Finland approximately 1,500.”

The figure for Lule Sámi in Ethnologue is probably also too high. Salminen (op. cit.: 257) says about Lule Sámi that “[t]he number of speakers lies somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000” in Norway and Sweden, but Morén-Duolljá (2010: 58), based on sources in the Lule Sámi communities, estimates the number to be just around 650 altogether in the two countries. In personal communication, Morén-Duolljá says that a good 400 appears to be a fairly good estimate of the number of active and proficient Lule Sámi speakers in Norway.

The Ethnologue figure for South Sámi appears more accurate. Citing several recent sources NOU (2016: 298) states that in Norway at least 270 individuals speak the language well and at least 340 individuals understand the language well.

For the purpose of the present paper, we will assume that in Norway there are approximately 15,000, 400 and 300 active users of North, Lule, and South Sámi, respectively.⁵ Given the estimate in Rasmussen (2017:43) that there are about 100,000 ethnic Sámi in Norway (cf. above) only around 15% of them are active users of a Sámi language.

To put these figures in perspective, the total Norwegian population is currently 5.39 million (2021 figure). The regions in Norway that are part of the traditional homelands of the Sámi (from north to south: the counties Troms og Finnmark, Nordland, and Trøndelag plus the area Nord-Østerdalen in Innlandet county) have about 958,000 inhabitants. In other words, the speakers of the Sámi languages make up a small minority, and Norwegian is the dominant language throughout the region.

A few local communities in the northernmost county Troms og Finnmark have a majority of Sámi language users (Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino, Kárášjohka/Karasjok) and altogether 13 municipalities throughout the area (4 for South, 1 for Lule, and 8 for North Sámi), as well as the county municipalities Troms og Finnmark, Nordland, and Trøndelag, are part of the Sámi Language Administrative Area (SLAA) (‘Forvaltningsområdet for samisk språk’, in Norwegian). This is a governmental installment, introduced as part of the Sámi Act of 1987, which grants Sámi the same judicial status as Norwegian in the area and which commits the local/regional authorities to facilitate the use and development of Sámi.

In contrast to the highly uncertain numbers of speakers/users of Sámi overall, there exist very exact figures for the number of pupils that receive instruction in the Sámi languages in Norway, and these figures are publicly available from the online database *Grunnskolen informasjonssystem* (GSI) run by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. We will shortly return to these figures.

⁴ Ethnologue cites “Laakso et al. (2013)” but provides no list of references: the source probably equals Laakso et al. (2016) in which the following statement can be found (p. 137): “The number of North Sámi speakers is estimated to be around 20,000 (no official statistics exist)”. Although their discussion centers around North Sámi in Norway, the statement cannot *per se* be taken to be about North Sámi in Norway only.

⁵ A thorough discussion of various sources for the number of Sámi language users in Norway is found in Todal (2013). The discussion does however not end in a firm conclusion regarding the numbers.

2.3 *Sámi language curricula and number of pupils in Norway*

The Norwegian school system is highly centralized with nationally defined curricula. Municipalities are in charge of organizing grades 1–10 (ages 6–16), which constitute the obligatory school years. The municipalities within the SLAA are obliged to follow a variant of the national curricula which to a greater extent emphasizes Sámi matters. Furthermore, the municipalities may locally enforce Sámi language instruction as an obligatory subject in its schools, but only four of them do so (Rasmussen, 2015:18⁶). At the same time, all pupils in the area, regardless of ethnicity, have the right to learn Sámi. Outside the SLAA, only pupils with a Sámi ethnic background have the explicit right to receive instruction in Sámi language as a school subject.

As for the curricula for the Sámi language subject in grades 1–10, there are three variants, which are the same across the three linguistic varieties. The curriculum “Sámi as first language”, generally referred to as ‘Sámi 1’, entails that the main literacy training happens through Sámi. The pupils who follow Sámi 1 receive five hours of instruction per week in the subject throughout the school years. Most of the North Sámi 1 pupils are enrolled in programs where (North) Sámi is the medium of instruction across all or most subjects, either at schools where Sámi is the main language or in Sámi medium classes/groups at Norwegian medium schools. In the school year 2020/2021 this applied to 92.7% of the North Sámi 1 pupils. For Lule and South Sámi there are no Sámi medium instruction programs.

The curriculum “Sámi as a second language” comes in two varieties, Sámi 2 and Sámi 3. Sámi 2 is a curriculum for pupils who have some knowledge of the language but who otherwise receive their main literacy training through the subject Norwegian and who have Norwegian as the medium of instruction in other subjects. They receive 3–4 hours of instruction in Sámi per week, varying somewhat with grade level. Sámi 3 is a curriculum that requires no prior knowledge of Sámi, and which is offered two hours per week throughout grades 1–10. Also for the Sámi 3 pupils Norwegian is otherwise the medium of instruction across subjects.⁷

It is worth pointing out there does not exist any language immersion program for Sámi in the Norwegian school system. The system caters for language maintenance in so far that the majority of Sámi first language children are enrolled in a program with Sámi as the medium of instruction (SMI), but there is no systematic way of including children with low competence in Sámi into such a program, for instance in the way it has been done for Inari Sámi in Finland (see Olthuis, Kivelä and Skutnabb-Kangas 2013). What we rather see is that there is a net loss of pupils from all Sámi curricula over the school years (see Vangsnes 2021), a fact that we will return to below in section 4.

Although it is tempting to link Sámi 1, Sámi 2, and Sámi 3 to the quite widely used terms ‘first’, ‘second’, and ‘third’ (or alternatively ‘foreign’) language, it is important to stress that they first and foremost signify the curricula and the extent of the formalized instruction: there may in fact be, and presumably are, pupils with Sámi as a first language who nevertheless for various reasons follow either Sámi 2 and Sámi 3.

	Sámi 1	Sámi 2	Sámi 3	Total
North Sámi	943	728	637	2,308
Lule Sámi	33	56	24	113
South Sámi	35	50	16	101
Total	1,011	834	677	2,522

Table 2: Number of pupils following different curricula for the three Sámi languages in use in Norway in the school year 2020/2021

⁶ When Rasmussen (2015) published his paper, the following three municipalities had Sámi as an obligatory school subject: Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino, Kárášjohka/Karasjok, and Unjárga/Nesseby. In 2021 Deatnu/Tana municipality also decided to install Sámi as an obligatory subject in grades 1–4, see <https://www.tana.kommune.no/cppage.6413478-161070.html>.

⁷ For further details, see <https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/lareplanverket/kunnskapsloftet-samisk/>.

Table 2 presents the number of pupils who followed the different curricula in the school year 2020/2021. The table quite clearly shows that North Sámi is by far the biggest of the Sámi languages also in the context of education in Norway.

The total number of pupils has not changed much over the last decade. In 2009 it was 2,336 decreasing to 2,116 in 2014 before increasing again. Figure 1 shows this development graphically for all three language varieties. Figures 2–4 furthermore illustrate the development for North Sámi, Lule Sámi, and South Sámi, respectively, each figure distinguishing between the three kinds of curricula. What is particularly noticeable for North Sámi is that there is a growing number of pupils following Sámi 2 at the expense of both Sámi 1 and Sámi 3 although the largest group is still Sámi 1. For both Lule and South Sámi the majority of pupils follow the Sámi 2 curriculum.

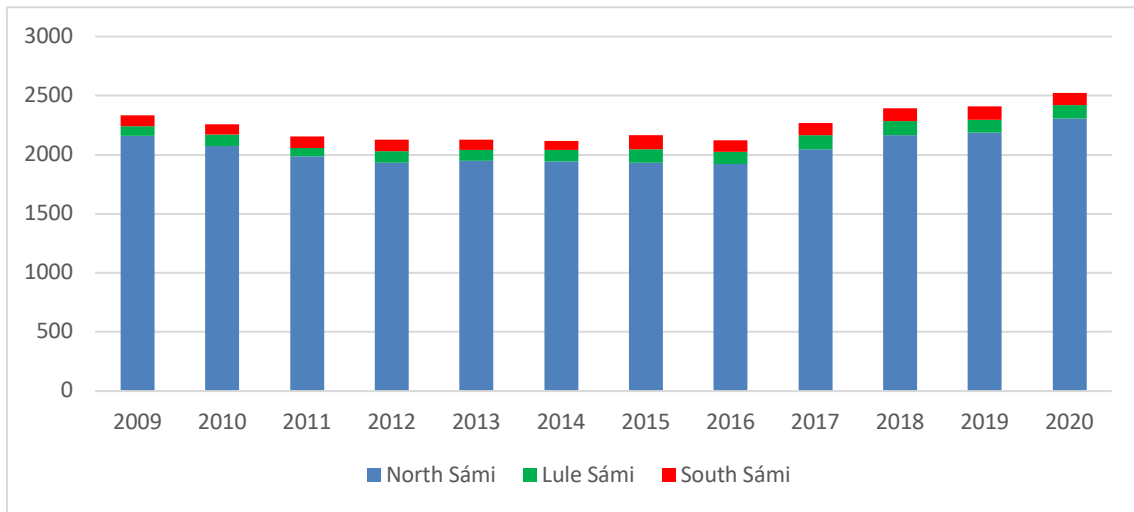


Figure 1: The total number of pupils receiving instruction in Sámi grades 1-10 from 2009 to 2020

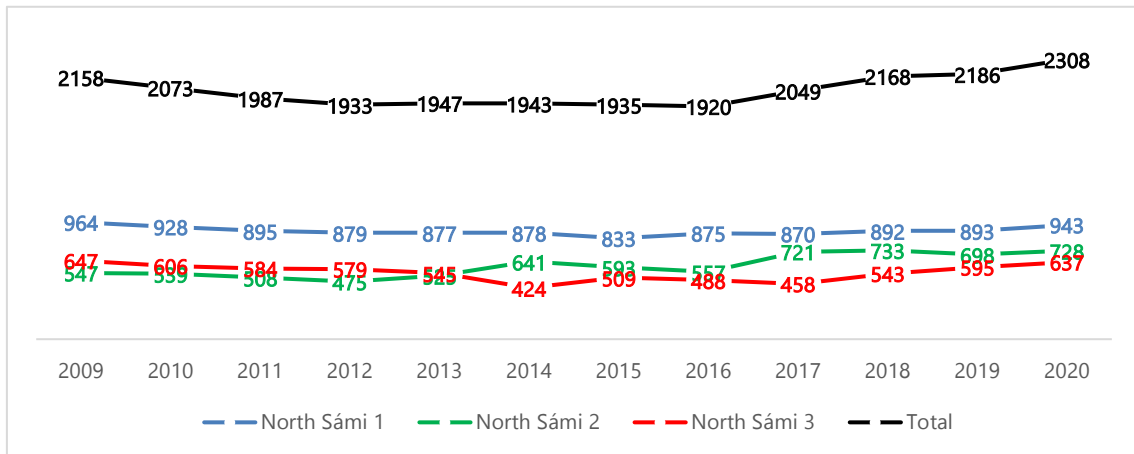


Fig. 2: Number of pupils in grades 1-10 with instruction in North Sámi in Norwegian schools between 2009 and 2020

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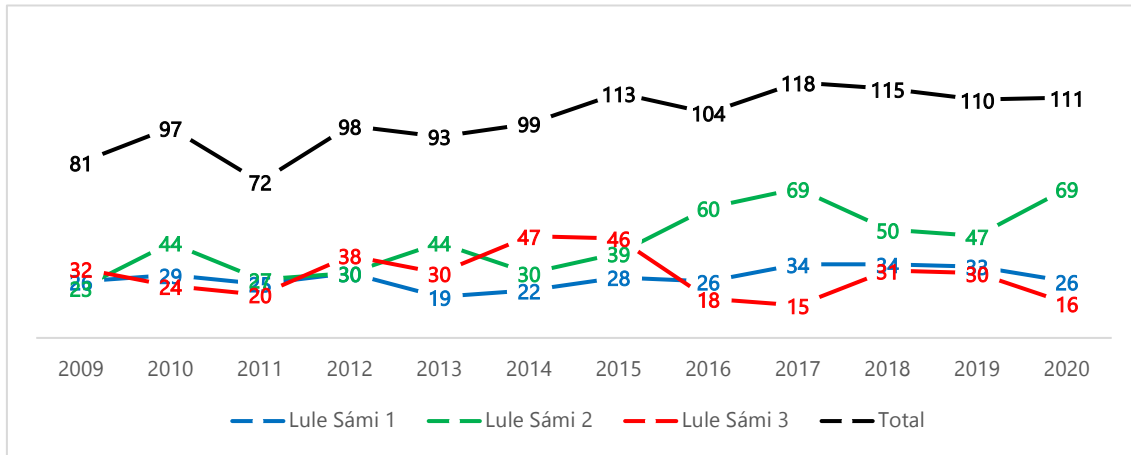


Fig. 3: Number of pupils in grades 1-10 with instruction in Lule Sámi in Norwegian schools between 2009 and 2018

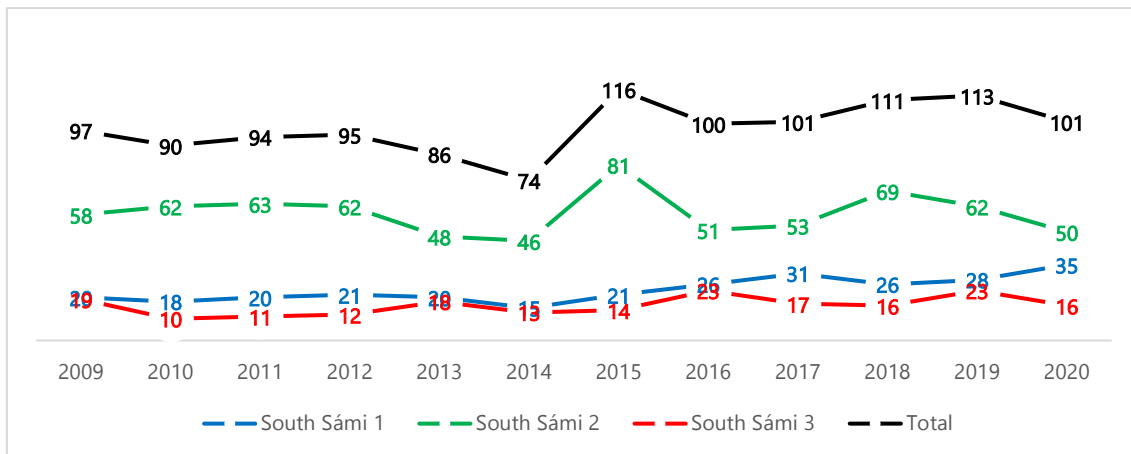


Fig. 4: Number of pupils in grades 1-10 with instruction in South Sámi in Norwegian schools between 2009 and 2018

In 2020/2021, the total number of pupils in grades 1–10 in Norwegian schools was 635,497. That means that the 2,394 pupils who received some form of instruction in one of the three “Norwegian” Sámi languages made up 0.38% of the total pupil population. The 952 Sámi 1 pupils made up 0.15% of all Norwegian pupils. This is worth keeping in mind as a token of how minoritized the Sámi languages are in the Norwegian society.

The school data just presented will form the basis for the prognoses to be developed in the next section. As mentioned in the introduction, a full model for estimating the future of a language population must also take into account recruitment of individuals who learn the language without receiving formal instruction in it in the school system. Nevertheless, basing the prognoses on the population of Sámi pupils relies on the assumption that this group will constitute the core of the future population of Sámi language users. The assumption may be scrutinized, and although ultimately an empirical question, the following characterization of the contemporary situation for Sámi language and culture by Ulla Aikio-Puoskari (2009) may be taken in support of it:

The present situation is characterised by an intensive struggle between a language and cultural shift on the one hand, and revitalisation and cultural survival on the other. The school and the teaching of and through the native languages are of great significance for the outcome of this competition. (Aikio-Puoskari 2009: 218)

3. Projections: The method

The total population of Norway was 5.39 million in 2021. In the school year 2020/2021, there were 635,497 pupils in grades 1–10, which means that they make up 11.8% of the total population. That gives a ratio for pupils to the rest of the population of 1:7.4.

We will now make the following assumptions: (i) the children receiving instruction in a Sámi language will be the main base of the future active speakers and bearers of the language, (ii) this number will remain at the same level as today, and (iii) the basic birth rate is more or less the same among the Sámi as in the rest of the Norwegian population. None of these assumptions are a natural given, but if we make them, we can estimate the future number of active users by the following method:

- (1) *Multiply the school figures by 7.4 and add to the resulting sum the school figures, i.e. $(n * 7.4) + n = x$.*

In the following we will let n be the figures for the school year 2020/2021. An alternative using the average of the 12-year period 2009-2020 would have given slightly smaller numbers, and since the fluctuation in Table 2 may signal a rising trend, we choose the last year as the basis for the projections. Furthermore, depending on whether we think that only Sámi 1 pupils, both Sámi 1 and 2 pupils, or Sámi 1, 2 as well as Sámi 3 pupils all will become future users and bearers of the languages, we get three different prognoses which we may term ‘sober’, ‘moderate’, and ‘optimistic’, respectively. Only incremental combinations of Sámi 1 to 3 are worth considering, which means that we exclude the combinations Sámi 2+3 and Sámi 1+3.

Table 3 gives the projections for North Sámi, and we use the figures for the school year 2020/2021. The individual projections from Sámi 2 and Sámi 3 are given for transparency only.

	n	n * 7.4	(n * 7.4) + n
North Sámi 1	943	6,978	7,921
North Sámi 2	728	5,387	6,115
North Sámi 3	637	4,713	5,351
North Sámi 1+2	1,625	12,365	14,036
North Sámi 1+2+3	2,168	17,079	19,387

Table 3: Projections for future users of North Sámi based on pupils to rest of population (ratio 7.4)

On the estimate given in the previous section that there are about 15,000 proficient users of North Sámi in Norway today, the sober prognosis for North Sámi is that the number will be reduced by almost a half, whereas by the moderate prognosis there will be a slight decrease, whereas by the optimistic one there will be a fair increase.

Table 4 gives the projections for Lule Sámi. Again Sámi 2 and 3 are given for transparency only.

	n	n * 7.4	(n * 7.4) + n
Lule Sámi 1	33	244	277
Lule Sámi 2	56	414	470
Lule Sámi 3	24	178	202
Lule Sámi 1+2	89	659	748
Lule Sámi 1+2+3	113	836	949

Table 4: Projections for future Lule Sámi users based on pupils to rest of population (ratio 7.4)

Given the estimate that there are about 400 active users of Lule Sámi in Norway (see above), the sober prognosis indicates a reduction in number of users to less than $\frac{3}{4}$ of today’s number. By the moderate prognosis, however, there will be almost a doubling of users, and by the optimistic prognosis the number will be more than doubled. In other words, the situation looks better for Lule Sámi than for North Sámi.

Table 5 gives the projections for South Sámi. The current number of active users of South Sámi in Norway is about 300 (see above). By the sober prognosis the number of future users will remain about the same as today. By the moderate prognosis, however, the number will be more than doubled, and by the optimistic prognosis the number will be almost tripled.

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	n	n * 7.4	(n * 7.4) + n
South Sámi 1	35	259	294
South Sámi 2	50	370	420
South Sámi 3	16	118	134
South Sámi 1+2	85	629	714
South Sámi 1+2+3	101	747	848

Table 5: Projections for future South Sámi users based on pupils to rest of population ratio (7.4)

The projections are shown graphically for North Sámi in Figure 5 and for Lule and South Sámi in Figure 6.

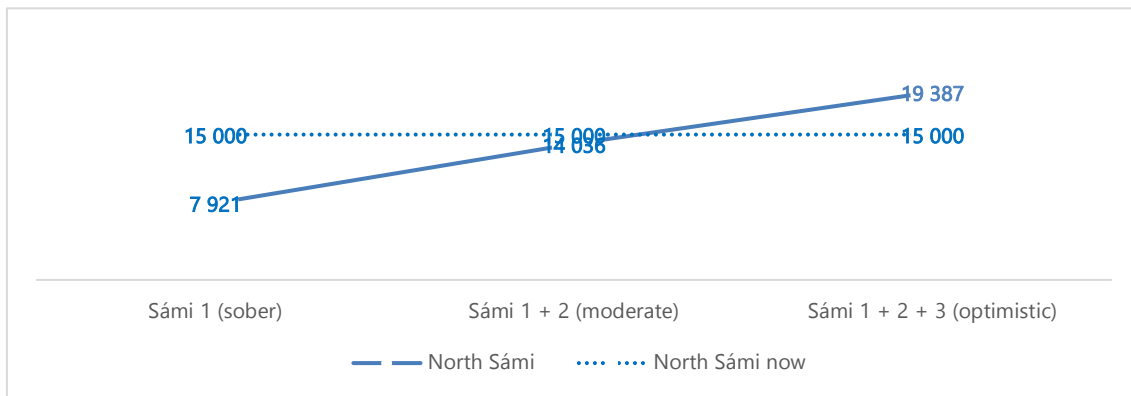


Figure 5: Future users of North Sámi in Norway projected from the current number of pupils in grades 1-10

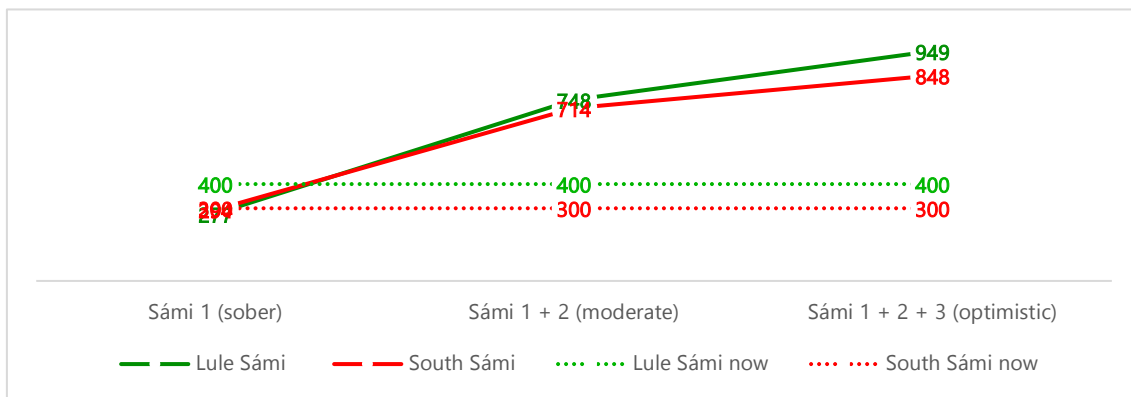


Figure 6: Future users of Lule and South Sámi in Norway projected from the current number of pupils in grades 1-10

The prognoses can be summarized as follows:

- (i) *Sober prognosis:* If the Sámi 1 curriculum is the only one which by and large is successful in producing future active users and language bearers there will be a decrease in the numbers compared to today. Although the decrease is only slight for Lule Sámi and none for South Sámi, it will be quite substantial for North Sámi, and thus also for all languages viewed together.
- (ii) *Moderate prognosis:* If both the Sámi 1 and Sámi 2 curriculum prove to produce future active users and language bearers the situation for North Sámi will be relatively stable, whereas for Lule and South Sámi there will be a significant increase in the numbers.

- (iii) *Optimistic prognosis*: If all three curricula serve to produce future active users and language bearers, all three varieties will experience an increase in numbers, and this increase will be particularly pronounced for Lule and South Sámi with two to three times more users.

The obvious conclusion to draw from this, is that in order for the educational system to serve as a vitalizer of Sámi in Norway, more than just the Sámi 1 pupils need to develop an active competence in the languages. Ensuring a good development also for the Sámi 2 pupils will give stability when we view the three languages as a whole—the significant increase for Lule and South Sámi will be subsumed by the numerical dominance of North Sámi. If also all Sámi 3 pupils obtain an active competence in the languages there will be an overall increase.

The question is which of the three scenarios—the sober, the moderate or the optimistic prognosis—is the most realistic one, or even whether any of them are in fact adequate. A variety of factors concerning acquisition in childhood and adolescence as well as opportunities to use and develop the language in adulthood must also be considered regarding which pupils and how many of them remain active language users also later in life. Such factors must be part of a broader model for assessing the vitality and future of the languages. In the next section we will discuss the prognoses further and also sketch key properties of a broader model for projections of the future number of users.

4. Discussion: towards a broader model

We may start the discussion of a broader model by considering four issues pertaining to the school-based prognoses as such. First, the optimistic prognosis may be deemed quite unlikely. The two hours of Sámi language instruction per week provided for the Sámi 3 pupils are not sufficient to make a substantial portion of them active and proficient users of the language. Many of these pupils have little or no prior knowledge of Sámi beforehand as many of them come from homes and families where Sámi is not spoken. Unless they are exposed to Sámi in other ways and in other contexts, they are thus not likely to develop their proficiency to an advanced level. Still, one should not underestimate the role of the Sámi 3 curriculum as one providing a useful base to support exposure from extra-curricular sources and/or a base from which the individual pupil later by self-driven interest may develop a stronger language competence.

Second, it is an open question whether all Sámi 2 pupils will remain active users of Sámi later in life. Sámi 2 pupils receive 3-4 hours of Sámi instruction per week and will have some prior knowledge of the language when entering school, but Norwegian will all the same be the main medium for literacy training for them. We may assume that for many of these pupils Norwegian is likely to play an increasingly dominant role in their lives as they mature.

Third, the sober prognosis could have been made more fine-grained by distinguishing between those Sámi 1 pupils that follow Sámi medium instruction (SMI) and those who do not. Pupils in SMI will inevitably get significantly more exposure to and training in a Sámi language than the non-SMI Sámi 1 pupils. The latter group is thus in a more vulnerable situation. Fortunately, this group constitutes a minority among the first language pupils: in the school year 2020/2021, they were 69 (out of 943) North Sámi, 33 Lule Sámi and 35 South Sámi pupils, which means 13.6% of all Sámi 1 pupils.

Fourth, an additional complication represented by using the 2020/2021 sum of all pupils is that when one looks closer at individual cohorts, there is a net loss of pupils over time. As reported in Vangsnæs (2021), on average 20.4% of the North Sámi 1 pupils who started first grade in the 12-year period from 2003 to 2011 left the program. For North Sámi 2, counted from a peak in pupil numbers in second grade, the loss is 33.6%, whereas the loss for North Sámi 3 is 63.1% counted from a peak in third grade. The total average loss across all curricula is 38.2% from top to bottom and 31.5% from first to tenth grade. These matters are illustrated graphically in Figure 7. The numbers for Lule and South Sámi are so small that they are not amenable for a similar statistical analysis, but a discussion can be found in Vangsnæs (op. cit.).

The reasons for this loss of pupils from the different kinds of formal instruction in Sámi need to be further investigated. To what extent the “leavers” also stop using and developing their competence in Sámi, we do not know. But crucially, if they do stop, the number used in the above prognoses is too high and must be adjusted accordingly.

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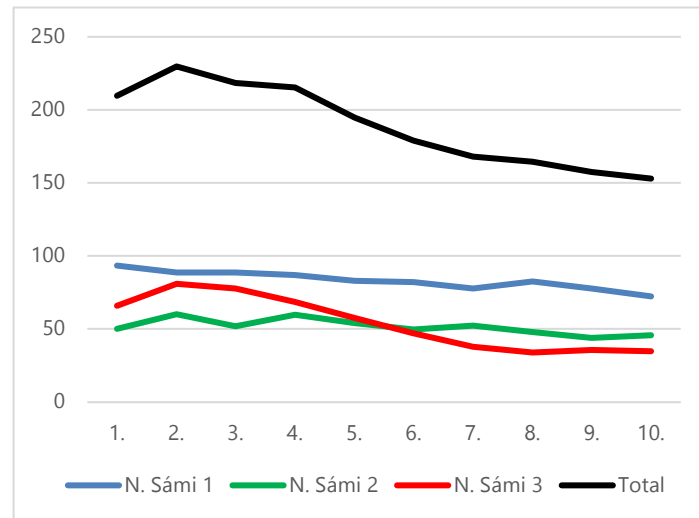


Figure 7: Average development of cohort size grades 1-10 for the North Sámi cohorts starting school in years 2003-2011. (North Sámi 3 was introduced in 2006 and grades 1-3 are therefore weighted for this curriculum.)

In addition to the four issues that have now been pointed out pertaining to the school-based prognoses *per se*, a more accurate prognosis should include groups of active language users who have acquired a functional competence in Sámi without formal instruction in the educational system. Two such categories appear especially relevant: (i) first language (L1) users who grow up using Sámi in the home environment but without receiving any formal instruction at school, (ii) second language (L2) users who have acquired the language in adulthood, i.e. the category increasingly referred to as ‘New Speakers’, see e.g. the papers in Soler & Darquennes (2019, and references provided there; see also Rasmus (2019), Rasmus and Lane (2021), for a qualitative study of Sámi New Speakers in two Sámi communities in Norway, and Pasanen (2019), for a discussion of Sámi New Speakers in Finland. In the advent of more thorough surveys we can only guess how big these groups of users may be in the Sámi context.

Regarding the first category, given that Norwegian Sámi L1 children are entitled to instruction in Sámi no matter where in the country they live, there are reasons to expect that rather few Sámi L1 children are not subsumed by official school statistics of the kind provided here.

On the other hand, adult L2 learners may represent a significant contribution to the population of speakers/users. In Norway, there are currently 19 Sámi language centers (see Sametinget, Undated) that organize different kinds of Sámi language courses (Nygaard et al., 2012). The courses are organized at varying intervals and they target different age groups and existing competence levels. In addition to this, both the Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino and UiT The Arctic University of Norway from time to time organize courses in North Sámi as a foreign language. Some courses are completed with an exam that give university level credits and which state particular competence levels. Other courses do not.

Antonsen (2015) provides an overview of how many students have taken exams and obtained credits in the years 2009-2014 from the Sámi as foreign language courses. According to her overview (op. cit.: 76ff), which involves courses provided at eight locations, 189 students completed an introductory level course, 130 students a second level introductory course, whereas 11 students completed a one semester course at the subsequent level. However, it is not known how many of these students are adult L2 learners with no or little knowledge of Sámi from childhood. Some of the students are likely to have had some Sámi background. They may even have had formal instruction in Sámi in school and hence be included in the school statistics discussed above.

Still, given that the number of proficient Sámi users is so low in the first place, even a small number of proficient adult L2 learners each year would make a significant contribution. If we for the sake of the argument say that the 19 centers and two universities annually produce on average three proficient New

Speakers each, over a time span of 50 years that would make up $(21 \times 3 \times 50 =) 3,150$. Fifteen of the institutions focus on North Sámi, and adding 2,250 to the estimates above would make both the sober and the moderate prognosis less grim for this variety of Sámi.

The bottom line is nevertheless that more research is needed to establish a better estimate of how many adult L2 learners obtain an active competence in Sámi outside of the regular school system. At the same time, such investigations should also seek to establish in what way, and by what numbers, the course activities serve to complement Sámi language instruction in school and thereby how they support pupils in both becoming and remaining active language users also in their adult lives.

The latter point brings us to the topic of ‘language vitality’. Bodies like Ethnologue, UNESCO and the Endangered Languages Project all list factors to assess language vitality which, although varying in number (from 12 to 4), largely overlap and converge. The nine factors given in UNESCO (2003) are the following.

1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population
4. Trends in existing language domains
5. Response to new domains and media
6. Materials for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies including official status and use
8. Community members’ attitudes toward their own language
9. Amount and quality of documentation

For each of these factors, UNESCO provides a scale from 0 to 5 to assess the vitality of a given language: the closer to 5, the more vital. In effect, a qualitative judgment of each factor can then be turned into a number which can be used to do a quantitative assessment.

It is outside the scope of the present paper to review the UNESCO assessment for the Sámi languages and/or similar protocols found in Ethnologue and the ELP. We may note that according to the UNESCO scheme North Sámi is currently classified as a *definitely endangered* language whereas both Lule and South Sámi are classified as *severely endangered* languages. What may be worth pointing out regarding this classification is that the projections provided in this paper signal more positive trends for both Lule and South Sámi than for North Sámi in the area of education.

Placing education at the center of the model, we can regard the recruitment of future active language users as a function of the number of pupils obtaining a strong productive competence in the language minus the number of such individuals leaving the language on their way into adulthood plus adult L2 learners, schematically represented as follows:

$$\{n \text{ child learners}\} - \{n \text{ leavers}\} + \{n \text{ New Speakers}\} = \{n \text{ future language users}\}$$

Vitality factors like the UNESCO ones play into this calculation either by supporting acquisition and use or by contributing to (or preventing) language shift and loss in individuals.

Returning to the Norwegian specific school system one may safely say that in order to increase the number of child learners the focus should be on the following: First, the number of Sámi 1 pupils—preferably in Sámi medium education—should be increased as this is the group which is most likely to become and remain active future users of a Sámi language. Second, the reasons for why a significant number of pupils leave Sámi instruction during the course of the obligatory school years should be given special attention. Third, the Sámi 2 and Sámi 3 curricula should be made as good as possible so as to provide good opportunities for individual pupils to strengthen their competence in Sámi outside the school system now or later in life. A fourth recommendation could be to formulate an ambition that the Sámi 3 and Sámi 2 curricula could facilitate pupils to “step up” to the more comprehensive curriculum (i.e., Sámi 3 → Sámi 2 → Sámi 1).

5 Conclusion

It should be clear from the discussion above that a number of factors need to be investigated further before more reliable projections of future numbers of Sámi language users (in Norway) can be made. We are currently not in a position to make projections like the one for example done for Welsh in Jones (2012:116).

Still, in a country like Norway it seems justifiable to assume that the number of pupils that receive literacy training in Sámi through the school system will make up a significant core of the future population of language users. Two arguments are central for underscoring this: (i) the Norwegian educational system is highly centralized and the teaching of Sámi is systematized in the form of three different curricula that target different groups of pupils, (ii) all ethnic Sámi children have a right to receive instruction in Sámi independently of where in Norway they live, and many make use of this right.

Based on this key presumption we can make three different projections—a sober, a moderate, and an optimistic prognosis—depending on whether just the first language pupils (Sámi 1) or also the second language pupils (Sámi 2) or even the foreign language pupils (Sámi 3) become future language users. By the sober prognosis North Sámi will experience a substantial decrease in numbers whereas Lule Sámi will see just a slight decrease and South Sámi hardly any. By the moderate analysis the future number of North Sámi language users will be more stable whereas the other two varieties will have a noticeable increase. By the optimistic prognosis even North Sámi will have an increase in number of users, and Lule and South Sámi will both see a very high increase.

A number of issues that may modulate the prognoses have been discussed, and although there is a high degree of uncertainty, at least one may hope that this study serves to point at some topics that need further investigation and that it highlights some aspects of how the Norwegian school system deals with instruction in the Sámi languages.

Some ethical remarks are in order at this closing point. The present author is not a member of the Sámi community and the method used in the study has not been developed in close collaboration with members of the community or with Sámi scholars, although both methods and results have been presented at several events organized by Sámi and for Sámi audiences. It should be stressed, though, that the purpose of the investigation has been to contribute positively to the efforts to strengthen the position of the Sámi languages in Norway and beyond. Hopefully, the study displays what assets, possibilities and challenges the current state-of-affairs provides, and that it thus may aid the discussion of what measures should be advanced to benefit the Sámi languages and its users in the future.

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