

A comparative study of user attitudes to Sámi orthographies

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the perceptions of three different Sámi orthographies – North, South and Skolt – among L1 and L2 users of these systems. We have chosen these three orthographies as they are used in three different comparable Nordic countries, while having different national histories and maximally different Latin-script orthographic conventions and sound systems. South Sámi, for example, lacks consonant gradation, whereas North Sámi has a complex system of consonant gradation and Skolt Sámi has a rich consonantal inventory including a palatalised versus non-palatalised phonemic distinction. North Sámi (*davvisámeigiella*) is spoken by around 25,000 people in Northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, and has the most widely used orthography. South Sámi (*áarjelsaemien giela*) is spoken by around 300–500 people in certain municipalities in central Sweden and Norway. Skolt Sámi (*nuõrttsää'mkiõll*) is spoken by around 300 people mostly in Sevettijärvi in Inari municipality in Finland. We have not included Kildin Sámi and its Cyrillic script in this initial study due to limitations in scope and lack of access to the speaker community. For a historical overview and analysis of Kildin Sámi orthography see Rießler (2013), Siegl and Rießler (2015) and Ivaniščeva (2016).

Orthography refers here to a standardised way of writing a language and representing its sounds in writing; in this study the term will be used interchangeably with *writing system*. The latter term can also refer to the categories of alphabets, syllabaries, and logographic systems (cf. Coulmas 2003: 35). The history of different Sámi orthographies dates back to missionary work in the Sámi-speaking area (Wiklund 1922; Korhonen 1976: 56, 1981: 53–57). Orthographies were developed for Bible translations and linguists carried on this work in line with a top-down approach. As early as

1648 Johannes Torneaus tried to combine elements from the Pite and Torne varieties of Sámi in his *Manuale Lapponicum* (Korhonen 1976: 56–57). Such a unified language planning approach has not been attempted since. Recent trends in Sámi orthography development have been more bottom-up with community involvement. Examples of the latter are the launches of an Ume Sámi orthography (Påve 2016) and Pite Sámi orthography (e.g., Sunna et al. 2019; Wilbur in this volume). Sámi languages have been perceived as separate languages especially after the creation of early orthographies (Aikio-Puoskari 2002: 102), which could be interpreted to suggest that having a distinct orthography for one’s own variety of Sámi is a particularly important marker of language identity (see also Jones and Mooney 2017: 1).

The current North Sámi orthography has been in the making since Knud Leem’s grammar in 1748 and dictionaries in 1768–81 (see Korhonen 1976: 57–58). Rasmus Rask introduced a phonemic principle for North Sámi orthography in 1832 (Rask 1832), which was used by Stockfleth in his grammar of 1840 (Stockfleth 1840). Nielsen launched an orthography in the late 1920s that did not remain the standard, and in 1947 a common orthography for the Sámis in Sweden and in Norway was discussed. The task of uniting the orthography was given to the Norwegian linguist Knut Bergsland and the Swedish (Pite Sámi) linguist Israel Ruong (Korhonen 1976: 57). The new orthography was adopted in 1950 by the Swedish and Norwegian Boards of Education to be used in schoolbooks (Bergsland 1952: 37–40). At the time, the Finnish North Sámi kept using their own orthography devised by the Finnish linguists Paavo Ravila in 1930s and Erkki Itkonen in 1950s (Korhonen 1981: 53–57). A new common North Sámi orthography for all three countries was adopted in 1979 and modified in 1985; it was seen as necessary for the survival of the language (Aikio 1987: 457). Some dialectal and country-specific variation is allowed in North Sámi publications.

An orthography for more southern varieties of Sámi was also launched relatively early, when Per Fjellström introduced a written standard which he used in the publication of a grammar and a dictionary in 1738 as well as a translation of the New Testament in 1755 (Korhonen 1976: 56). Contemporary South Sámi, which is used in Norway and Sweden, employs an orthography that was initially adopted in 1976. While the Sámi Language Board currently recommends a single unified orthography for users in both Norway and Sweden (cf. Magga and Magga 2012: 12), in practice South Sámi publications from Norway tend to use Norwegian graphemes while their counterparts from Sweden tend to use Swedish graphemes (see below for details).

In contrast to North Sámi and the more southern varieties, the first Skolt Sámi orthography was developed only in the early 1970s. Linguists Mikko Korhonen, Jouni Moshnikoff and Pekka Sammallahti chose to base it on the Suõ'nn'jel (Suonikylä) dialect (Kulonen et al. 2005: 399; Moshnikoff 2014). It was initially planned to be similar to the existing North Sámi writing system, but by the time the North Sámi orthography was revised and unified in the late 1970s, Skolt no longer resembled it (Wesslin and Alajärvi 2016).

There are few studies that focus exclusively on Sámi orthographies, and only one previous study that investigates users' attitudes to them. Sorjonen (2019) studied perceptions of Sámi orthographies among Finnish Sámi in the context of revitalisation. She identified three main challenges: learning the orthography, producing special characters, and the approval of written standards by the language community. Sámi orthographies are also mentioned in official reports (Moshnikoff and Moshnikoff 2006; Aikio-Puoskari 2016; Pasanen 2016) and in relation to the assessment of revitalization efforts (Olthuis et al. 2013; Pasanen 2015). For example, according to Pasanen's (2016: 43) report, a lack of reading skills in all the Sámi varieties spoken in Finland (i.e., North Sámi, Inari Sámi, and Skolt Sámi) is an obstacle to taking advantage of Sámi-language services. Similarly, Moshnikoff and Moshnikoff (2006: 4–5) mention that speakers of Skolt Sámi note difficulties in reproducing the special orthographic symbols in print, and that as a result the quality of Skolt Sámi publications suffers. In addition to these official reports, there is debate in the media about Sámi orthographies. For example, Wesslin and Alajärvi (2016) reported in the Finnish news that many Skolt Sámi speakers do not know how to read and write their mother tongue. The writing system is especially difficult for the older generation as it was devised and taught in schools only from the 1970s; many feel that the spoken language is very different from the written language (Wesslin and Alajärvi 2016). Moreover, Sámi languages are generally considered to be too different from each other to have one unified orthography (Korhonen 1981: 53), although some people see this as a consequence of a divisive politics (e.g., Lindqvist 2016). Nils-Henrik Sikku from the Sámi Writers' Association *Bágo* says that the different orthographies are a taboo subject (Lindqvist 2016).

Against this background, the research questions in our pilot survey study are: How do speakers of the chosen Sámi languages (North, South and Skolt) perceive their orthographies? What are the challenges in using Sámi writing systems from the speakers' point of view? Would the speakers want to change their orthographies? What are the theoretical implications of speakers' preferences? What are the discursive practices and ideologies surrounding the

use of the selected orthographies? What do the respondents use their orthographies for, i.e., what do they read and write?

2. Theory

Theoretically, our study is based on the sociolinguistics of language policy and practice. Spolsky (2004, 2011: 148–150) divides language policy into three components: language practices, language beliefs or ideology, and language management. In our study the first component refers to the languages our respondents write or read in. The second component, beliefs, refers to the attitudes the respondents have toward the orthography they use or are expected to use. Language management refers to attempts to modify the status or use of a language, attempts to modify the specific standard, and attempts to modify or increase the number of speakers. We ask the speakers about the ways in which they would change the orthography and how they feel about its use, which seeks to explore the underlying question of the relationship between the degree of a language's endangerment and its orthography. Graphisation, i.e., receiving a written form, makes many maintenance and revitalisation activities possible, including curriculum development and teaching materials (Lüpke 2011: 312). An orthography can increase the prestige and status of a language and may help create a sense of one unified identity (Jones and Mooney 2017: 1).

We also make use of different dimensions of orthography development (e.g., Sebba 2007, 2009; Grenoble and Whaley 2006; Cahill 2014; Hinton 2014; Lüpke 2011; Jones and Mooney 2017). The following factors have been identified as being key in creating successful orthographies. When devising an orthography, one should consult the speaker community when making decisions about the orthography. In addition to speaker input and community involvement, one should aim to find a balance between the ease of learning and ease of reproduction of an orthography vs the maximum representation of speech. If one chooses to represent all phonemes or even allophones in a language, the result may end up being an orthography with many diacritics and additional denotations that the user cannot remember or acquire, or type with computer or phone. The rendering of phonological distinctions can in this respect be characterised in terms of overrepresentation vs underrepresentation. In the case of Sámi languages, it applies to ways of marking consonant and vowel length, aspiration, and consonant gradation. This relates to the concept of orthographic depth (cf. Ziegler et al. 2010: 551–552). Shallow orthographies have a one-to-one phoneme to grapheme match and are predictable. Deep orthographies, on the other hand, are more arbitrary in the

way they are pronounced and are often based on etymologies or morphophonemics. One also needs to take into consideration users' knowledge of majority-language orthography or legacy orthography: it might be worth basing graphemes and orthography conventions on these as the users will already be used to them. A case in point is Lule Sámi, whose orthography users are most familiar with Swedish orthography. Sometimes a so-called 'ideological distancing' (Jones and Mooney 2017: 25–26) may be preferred by the speaker community. This means that they may consciously choose to use graphemes or even a script that is different from the one used by the majority language or a different variety of the language. This is the case for example with the Inuktitut syllabary which is maximally different from the Latin script used by the colonial majority language English, and is based on a Cree syllabary instead. One should also decide which dialect one should base the orthography on. One solution to this would be to allow optional spelling or graphemes for dialectal variation rather than force everyone to use one standard.

We can exemplify some of the concepts above with some of the present-day Sámi orthographies used in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. An example of majority-language influence is that fact that Inari Sámi (spoken in Finland) uses the Finnish ⟨ä⟩ and ⟨y⟩, word-initial ⟨k⟩, ⟨p⟩, and ⟨t⟩ for unaspirated word-initial stops, and double vowels to indicate vowel length, whereas in South Sámi (Norway, Sweden) the Norwegian/Swedish graphemes ⟨æ⟩/⟨ä⟩, ⟨ø⟩/⟨ö⟩, and ⟨å⟩ are used, with readers and writers tending to choose the variant that they prefer based on their country of residence (so that South Sámi written in Norway typically uses the Norwegian graphemes, while South Sámi written in Sweden typically uses the Swedish ones). Similarly, Kildin Sámi (spoken in Russia) is written using the majority (Cyrillic) alphabet. An example of ideological distancing is the fact that North Sámi (spoken in Norway, Sweden, and Finland) is free from country-specific graphemes and instead uses graphemes that are distinctly Sámi and are not found in the majority languages, e.g., ⟨č⟩, ⟨š⟩ and ⟨ŋ⟩. This can be contrasted with South Sámi where these same sounds are written as they would be in Norwegian or Swedish: ⟨tj⟩, ⟨sj⟩ and ⟨ng⟩, respectively. All the Sámi orthographies are relatively shallow, but Skolt Sámi is a good example of an orthography that chooses to represent fine phonological distinctions which are not indicated in other Sámi orthographies; for example, Skolt Sámi distinguishes orthographically between e.g., ⟨a⟩ /a/ and ⟨â⟩ /æ/, between ⟨z⟩ /dz/ and ⟨ž⟩ /dž/, between ⟨g⟩ /g/, ⟨ǧ⟩ /ǧǧ/, and ⟨g̃⟩ /g̃/, between ⟨k⟩ /k/ and ⟨k̃⟩ /c̃c̃/, and between o /o/ and ⟨ō⟩ /ə/.

3. Methodology and data

3.1. Survey design

The method in this study is primarily qualitative content analysis. Our data were collected via an online survey which was created using SurveyMonkey. The survey consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions supplemented by some open questions regarding reading and writing practices among speakers of North Sámi, South Sámi, and Skolt Sámi. The questions were produced in three different versions, one in Norwegian (for North Sámi speakers living in Norway), one in Swedish (for South Sámi speakers living in Sweden), and one in Finnish (for Skolt Sámi speakers living in Finland).¹ Participants were told that they could answer the questions in the language of their choice (Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, or a Sámi language). Participants were asked how often they read and write in the relevant Sámi language and given a choice of ‘often (many times a week or on a daily basis), sometimes (no more than once or twice a week), rarely (no more than once or twice a month), or never’. In each case they were given the option to add comments in a free-text box. They were also asked how often they write in the relevant variety of Sámi, with the same options for responses and space for additional comments. Participants were then asked what types of materials they read and write in their Sámi language most frequently, with a range of options listed including novels, non-fiction books, textbooks, homework, websites, text/messaging, emails, etc. They were also given space to add comments in a free-text box. Participants were also asked how they felt about reading and writing in their Sámi language, with a free-text box for responses. Finally, participants were asked whether there was anything that they would change about the orthography of their Sámi language, with another free-text box for responses. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide their age, gender, occupation, first language, and languages regularly spoken. The three versions of the survey were disseminated mainly via Facebook pages for the communities in question (the North Sámi page *Ártegis sagat*, the South Sámi *Numhtie naemhtie soptsestibie*, and the Skolt Sámi community page *Kolttakulttuurisäätiö*).² They surveys were completed between August and

¹ Producing alternative versions of each questionnaire for Sámi speakers in the other relevant countries (i.e., Swedish- and Finnish-language versions of the North Sámi questionnaire for speakers living in Sweden and Finland, a Norwegian-language version of the South Sámi questionnaire for speakers living in Norway, and a Russian-language version of the Skolt Sámi questionnaire for speakers living in Russia) was beyond the scope of this study, but is a desideratum for a larger-scale research project on Sámi orthographies.

² We would like to thank Olle Kejonen, Richard Kowalik, and Timothy Feist for their help in disseminating the survey.

October 2019. All participants gave permission for their responses to be used in the study.

3.2. Survey responses

North Sámi

We received 25 responses from North Sámi participants. Survey respondents were aged between 18 and 72, with most speakers in their 30s and 40s. The respondents were relatively equally balanced in terms of gender, with 11 men and 14 women. They represented a range of different occupations: consultant/advisor, language worker, student, (Sámi) teacher, carpenter, pensioner, artist, IT consultant, reindeer herder, psychologist, self-employed, journalist, and translator. The majority of respondents (16) listed Sámi or North Sámi as their first language, with another 2 respondents listing Sámi and Norwegian, 1 listing Sámi and Swedish, 3 listing Norwegian, 1 listing Finnish, and another 2 unspecified. All respondents reported that they speak North Sámi every day or all the time.

South Sámi

We received 11 responses for our South Sámi survey. While fewer than the number of North Sámi responses, this is in keeping with the much smaller South Sámi speaker population. Like North Sámi, the South Sámi respondents represented a wide range of ages, between 19 and 71. The gender division was less even than that of North Sámi, with 3 men and 8 women. A large selection of different types of professions were represented, with respondents citing the following occupations: teacher, administrator, pensioner, economist, self-employed, reindeer herder, South Sámi language professional. The respondents reported a much wider range of first languages than their North Sámi counterparts, with the following responses: Norwegian (2), Norwegian and South Sámi (1), Swedish (2), Sámi (2), South Sámi (2), North Sámi (1), and Swedish/English bilingual (1). Most respondents reported that they speak South Sámi daily, with a minority reporting that they speak it less often.

Skolt Sámi

We received 14 responses for our Skolt Sámi questionnaire, which is substantial considering the small total speaker population. As in the case of North and South Sámi, there was a considerable age range (25–79). Like in the South Sámi survey, there were more female than male respondents with 1 man, 12 women, and 2 undeclared. There was again a wide range of self-reported professions: student, professional, care assistant, researcher, customer service assistant, sales assistant, occupational therapist, consultant,

pensioner, secretary, and chef. There was a greater range of first languages, with respondents reporting Skolt Sámi (4), Karelian and Finnish (1), Finnish (5), Finnish and Skolt Sámi (2), Finnish, with Skolt Sámi acquired as an adult (1). One respondent did not provide an answer for this question. There was also a wider range of answers regarding frequency of use: some respondents used the language every day, while others said ‘whenever there’s someone to speak to’, ‘a couple of times a week’, ‘a couple of times a month’, and ‘rarely’.

4. Analysis of data

North Sámi

The North Sámi respondents reported very high frequencies of reading, with 84% saying daily or many times per day, 12% sometimes, and just 4% rarely. Most respondents read multiple types of texts, i.e., internet news, social media, emails, text messages, work documents, children’s books, and textbooks. Of these, internet news, social media, and emails were the most common. When asked how it feels to read in North Sámi, the answers were generally positive. Some respondents expressed great enthusiasm, e.g., ‘it’s the best thing there is’ and ‘great’. There were several responses focusing on ease and intuitiveness, e.g., ‘it’s easy and often very poetic as I’ve had it in school’, ‘easy, good, and simple orthography’, and ‘it’s easy’. Others highlighted the ‘naturalness’ of reading in the language, e.g., ‘good, simple, and natural’, ‘it is very natural to read one’s own language. I am used to reading Sámi’, and ‘almost as natural for me as speaking North Sámi’. One respondent described the reading experience as ‘fun and educational’. Only a small minority of respondents suggested that they found North Sámi difficult to read. However, they also framed their responses in a positive way, saying e.g., ‘I prefer to read in North Sámi although it can be hard’ and ‘I think it’s nice but it is slower than in Norwegian [...]’. Only one respondent expressed a purely negative opinion, describing the experience of reading Sámi merely as ‘tough’.

The North Sámi respondents reported similarly high writing frequencies, with 84% saying daily or many times a day, 8% saying sometimes and only 4% saying rarely. As with reading, respondents reported writing a wide range of texts, i.e., e-mails, text messages, comments on social media, lists, reports, work documents, stories, and poetry. Of these, emails, text messages, and comments on social media were the most common.

When asked how it feels to write in North Sámi, respondents were generally very positive. Some respondents reported excitement and great enthusiasm, e.g., ‘Great! It’s soooooo great. The best way to communicate with others’ and ‘I think it’s exciting to write in my mother tongue’. Another

commented on it being ‘fun’ to write in North Sámi. Other respondents commented on the ‘naturalness’ of writing in North Sámi, with one explaining ‘It’s easier because it comes so naturally. It’s easy to write one’s own language as it’s so natural. When I write Norwegian I have to think more about how I should write’ and another saying ‘it’s natural for me as it’s my mother tongue but I still don’t write 100% correctly’. This latter comment reflects a wider concern about making mistakes when writing in North Sámi; another respondent observed that ‘It’s easy but it bothers me that I still make mistakes writing’. Along similar lines, two respondents noted simply that it is ‘difficult’ to write in North Sámi. Others addressed specific difficulties, with one saying that ‘sometimes it’s difficult especially with diphthongs’, and another referring to the speed of writing: ‘It goes a bit slower than in Norwegian’. Only one respondent commented on keyboard limitations, saying ‘I like to write North Saami. I do it as often as I can if I’m not hindered by the keyboard [...]’. This suggests that most participants did not find the special North Sámi characters particular obstacles to writing the language, but keyboard problems were not completely unknown.

When asked for their opinions about the North Sámi orthography, many respondents again gave positive answers. Some commented on its logical and phonetic nature, e.g.: ‘it’s logical, reminds me of maths’, while another responded that ‘It works well and is logical, the orthographic rules are closer to the spoken language than Norwegian’. One respondent observed that the current North Sámi orthography is ‘easier than the earlier orthography’, while another expressed concern for the prospect of the system being changed again, stating that ‘it’s very well suited for the language. It shouldn’t be changed. We Sámi writers should instead learn to use it and children must have teachers who can use it’. Other respondents were less positive: one touched on the lack of orthographic representation for different North Sámi varieties, saying, ‘the Kautokeino dialect, it doesn’t suit those of us from Varanger’. Another expressed the opinion that the special North Sámi characters ‘should’ve been thrown in the bin long time ago. It just makes a mess, especially within IT’. One respondent specifically addressed the issue of distancing, saying ‘I don’t think that a small language like Sámi benefits from having different letters than the big neighbouring languages’.

When asked whether they would change anything in the North Sámi orthography, 69% said no, and 26% said yes. One respondent who did not want anything to be changed commented that ‘it has been changed too many times already’, pointing to the importance of continuity and stability. One respondent who did want to see changes said that they would remove the special signs ⟨á⟩, ⟨š⟩, ⟨č⟩, ⟨ž⟩, ⟨ŋ⟩, ⟨t̥⟩, ⟨đ⟩. Another commented that they would

‘mark length of vowels, mark the vowels [sic] today marked with *h* in front, e.g., *hl*, *hr*’, with a third saying ‘when I teach Sámi, of course sometimes one would wish that consonant gradation was *hht* : *ht* instead of *htt* : *ht* and *sst* : *st* instead of *st* : *stt* so that it corresponded better with the way it’s pronounced’. One respondent said that they would change the orthography ‘to include Varanger dialect’. Conversely, another observed that, despite the competing demands of speakers of different dialects of North Sámi, on balance it would not be practical for the orthography to take these into account: ‘The orthography is a compromise between all the different dialects so if I start to wish for changes based on my dialect then others might want thousands of small changes based on their dialect and then it would be chaos’.

South Sámi

The South Sámi respondents generally reported a high frequency of reading, although somewhat lower than their North Sámi counterparts: 73% reported reading daily or many times a day, with only 9% saying sometimes. A relatively high percentage, 19%, reported reading only rarely. Most respondents reported reading multiple types of texts, i.e., social media, textbooks, text messages, children’s books, newspapers, online news, popular science, professional literature, and novels. The most popular among these were social media, textbooks, and text messages. The inclusion of textbooks in this list differs from the North Sámi data, and reflects the slightly different demographic among the South Sámi cohort which contains more L2 speakers.

When asked how it feels to read, the South Sámi respondents, like their North Sámi counterparts, generally reported positive feelings. However, the reactions were less emphatic: while one respondent commented that it was ‘great; sometimes fantastic’, most said simply ‘good’. One focused on the educational and symbolic value of reading in South Sámi, noting that ‘it’s fun, the language feels important. It’s educational to get to see new words, how other people put together sentences, etc.’ Their use of the term ‘important’ echoes one of the North Sámi comments, as well as their observation that an orthography elevates the language’s importance. Another respondent expressed a more neutral viewpoint, saying, ‘There’s no difference in reading South Sámi and Swedish but texts about Sámi culture, traditional and reindeer herding are better for reading in South Sámi or North Sámi’. The South Sámi respondents, in contrast to their North Sámi counterparts, expressed some concern with the quality of written language, e.g.: ‘good if there aren’t too many grammatical and spelling mistakes, and full of Norwegianisms’. On a similar note, another respondent referred to difficulties stemming from lack of fluency in the language itself, noting that ‘it’s difficult when you don’t know

so much but everyday expressions and sentences are fine'. This also reflects the greater number of L2 speakers of South Sámi in general, and among the survey respondents in particular.

The South Sámi respondents reported a somewhat lower frequency of writing than their North Sámi counterparts, with only 65% writing on a daily basis or multiple times per day. 19% said that they write sometimes, with another 19% reporting that they write only rarely. Respondents reported writing a wide variety of textual genres, namely notes, text messages, social media comments, poetry, newspaper articles, stories, language learning materials, and essays, with notes, text messages, and social media comments being the most common.

When asked how it feels to write in South Sámi, some respondents answered 'good' or 'fun', with one commenting enthusiastically that 'to express yourself in your own language is a feeling that cannot be described'. One respondent said, 'thanks to the Sámi spellchecker from the University of Tromsø it is easy to write now'; adding 'I also write a dialect which has become more accepted recently'. However, some respondents reported more negative experiences of writing, but, as in the case of reading discussed above, these were tied to grammatical difficulties rather than stemming directly from orthographic challenges. One commented, 'It feels good most of the time but because you don't do it often you get rusty', while another said that 'it's difficult to try to change the form of verbs and nouns'.

When asked for their opinions about the South Sámi orthography, some respondents responded positively that it is 'logical, actually completely fantastically constructed' or 'easy, intuitive but the excess of *h* can sometimes go overboard'. One respondent said 'I've learnt it, it's easy to use', suggesting that their comfort with the written language is attributable directly to the fact that they have invested time in acquiring proficiency in it. One speaker felt that the system is too complex but that this complexity is justified, saying 'there are many who think there are too many vowels and too many rules but they are important to distinguish words'. Another echoed this sentiment, saying 'crazy long but if you know it, it's not a problem'. A third acknowledged the tensions inherent in the development of the system: 'It's been a long process with many compromises. I accept that those who worked on the writing system came up with this. But I of course pronounce the words as in my own dialect but then you have to understand which dialect you're supposed to be speaking'. One respondent expressed slightly more dissatisfaction with the complexity of the system, remarking that '17 letters in one word is too much'.

Finally, when asked whether they would change anything about the South Sámi orthography, 91% said no, with only 9% saying yes. Of that 9%, the only respondent to comment further said that they would like to see the South Sámi orthography move ‘closer to the North Sámi orthography’.

Skolt Sámi

Skolt Sámi respondents reported more variation in reading practices than their North and South Sámi counterparts: only 43% said that they read daily or many times a day, with another 43% saying sometimes and the remaining 14% saying rarely. Most respondents reported reading multiple genres, namely social media, children’s books, online news, textbooks, memoirs, books, and emails. Of these, the most common were social media, children’s books, and online news. This differs slightly from the North and South Sámi data, which did not include children’s books as a commonly read text type. Some Skolt Sámi respondents commented on the reasons for infrequent reading, with one mentioning a lack of materials, while another cited difficulty in the skill of reading, saying ‘I haven’t learnt the letters’ and a third mentioned insufficient command of the language itself.

Regarding their feelings about reading in Skolt Sámi, a few respondents gave positive answers, but less enthusiastically than their North and South Sámi counterparts, e.g., ‘no problem’ and ‘good’. One respondent echoed the theme of identity seen in some of the North and South Sámi responses: ‘Great. Language is part of your identity’. Another expressed satisfaction associated with the achievement of learning to read the language, saying ‘I’ve learnt in school so it [feels] good’. However, many respondents expressed a more ambivalent opinion, with some commenting on it being difficult, slow, or cumbersome. In one case a respondent cited challenges stemming from the fact that the language had only developed a standardised orthography relatively recently (i.e., in the early 1970s; cf. Moshnikoff and Moshnikoff 2006). In another case, a respondent attributed their challenges with reading to the soft sign (i.e., the diacritic (‘), which is added before a dental consonant to mark palatalization), calling it an ‘unnecessary invention’ and saying that it ‘makes it hard to recognize the text and it all looks like a mess’.

Skolt Sámi respondents reported significantly lower rates of writing than their North and South Sámi peers, with only 29% saying that they wrote daily or many times a day, 29% saying sometimes, 29% rarely, and 14% never. This is the only respondent group to contain a percentage who never write. The Skolt Sámi respondents reported writing a wide range of different materials, namely text messages, emails, social media comments, homework, translation work, *leu'dd* (traditional songs), stories, prose texts, letters, and jokes with

Skolt friends. Some of these (*leu'dd* and jokes), were not mentioned in the other groups' responses. As in the case of North and South Sámi, the most commonly written genres were text messages, e-mails, and social media comments.

When asked how it feels to write in Skolt Sámi, there were only a few positive responses, in marked contrast to the other groups. While two respondents said that it was 'good' or 'nice', others gave more nuanced answers, e.g., 'quite easy as I've been practicing for years', highlighting the fact that years of study were a factor in their positive attitude. Two respondents expressed the feeling that writing in Skolt Sámi has no function ('there isn't actually a need to write' and 'it's not meaningful to write on one's own'), a sentiment not observed in the North and South Sámi groups. Other respondents suggested that writing in Skolt Sámi is a struggle, citing lack of tuition, e.g., 'the letters weren't studied' and 'limited knowledge' and the complexity of the orthography itself, e.g., 'I would write more if the written language wasn't so shockingly complicated. Having studied [the language] I don't dare to write spoken language anymore' and 'damned hard and difficult. Separate keyboard has to be installed and you put them on the work phone and the work computer. Softening signs ruin everything, you never know where you're supposed to put them. There's no joy or ease to writing like this'. Another respondent raised the same issue of keyboard incompatibility: 'I don't know how to write and I don't have the letters on the phone and computers'. These difficulties are much greater than those mentioned by the North and South Sámi respondents.

When asked specifically about their opinions of the Skolt Sámi orthography, some respondents expressed positive feelings but highlighted the need to study it explicitly in order to achieve mastery of it: 'the alphabet is clear if you know it and learn it', 'I've learnt it as a child so I don't find it hard', and 'I think it's functional: if you know how to pronounce the language, writing and reading go without problems'. Other respondents expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with particular elements of the orthography. One identified a particular set of consonants that they felt should be written more like their Finnish equivalents: 'In my opinion the letters *cc*, *c*, *č* are not needed but it would be written as *ts*. For example, water = *čäücc* = *tšäüts*'. Two respondents commented on the soft signs and apostrophes being frustrating and difficult to remember (though one noted that they are important for the language's phonology). One respondent remarked more generally that the orthography is 'far too complicated', and another described it as 'difficult [and] messy'. The difficulty of writing on a standard keyboard was raised again, with one respondent saying that it is 'challenging on a computer and on

the phone because the keyboards are designed for different kinds of alphabets. It's especially difficult if you want to write Finnish/Scandinavian languages and Skolt at the same time.' Overall, the opinions on Skolt Sámi orthography diverge significantly from those given for North and South Sámi.

When asked whether they would change anything about their orthography, interestingly, only 28% of Skolt Sámi respondents replied positively, with 71% saying that they would not. This percentage resembles that of North Sámi, but the comments differ widely between the two groups, with the North Sámi respondents much less likely to suggest specific changes. One Skolt Sámi respondent suggested that there should be a symbol ⟨ts⟩, as in Finnish, instead of the special symbol ⟨č⟩ (which, interestingly, is shared with North Sámi; the respondent would prefer a digraph shared with the majority national language, Finnish). Another commented on several areas for reform relating to special consonant symbols: 'I would leave the "threes" [⟨ʒ ʒ⟩ /d̥z/ and ⟨ʒ̣ ʒ̣⟩ /d̥ʒ/] out as no one has been able explain their exact pronunciation. And tone down the apostrophe hysteria. To my understanding there are three different ones: does anyone else apart from linguists and language fanatics feel the need for them?' Another respondent said 'at least get rid of soft signs'. One respondent gave a general comment in the same vein: 'simplify the alphabet so the written language would be more approachable'.

5. Conclusions

Our study has revealed both similarities and differences in the way the three groups of respondents employ and perceive their orthographies. Out of the three groups of respondents, North Sámi speakers use the language the most both in speech and writing on a daily basis. North Sámi respondents generally reported positive feelings about the orthography, calling it logical, natural, and an important symbolic marker of identity. This is consistent with Sorjonen's (2019) findings regarding the importance of orthography as a positive marker of identity among Finnish Sámi, as well as with those of Jones and Mooney (2017) for endangered language users more generally. The distancing principle underpinning the orthography was not identified as particularly problematic, with only a small number of respondents expressing a desire for the special graphemes to be removed. Just one respondent mentioned difficulties with keyboard incompatibility, so this does not appear to have been a major concern. There was a general feeling that the orthography has already been changed too many times and should now remain stable, with more effort going into learning and using it. Only a minority of respondents mentioned having some difficulties in writing correctly.

South Sámi respondents reported reading and writing somewhat less frequently than their North Sámi counterparts, but were also happy with their orthography overall. Like the North Sámi respondents, they mentioned the important symbolic value of the orthography for their linguistic identity. In contrast to North Sámi, South Sámi does not reflect a distancing model but rather its graphemes are based on those of the majority languages Swedish and Norwegian. Thus, the data show that both distancing and non-distancing models can be popular among readers and writers of Sámi languages. Interestingly, one South Sámi respondent reported a desire for their language to be spelt like North Sámi, suggesting a drive towards greater symbolic unity between the different Sámi languages rather than the need for a close resemblance to the majority national languages. (Interestingly, such an orthography was once developed; see Bergsland and Hasselbrink 1957). North Sámi and South Sámi respondents are aware of the fact that orthography is a compromise between different dialects and are generally satisfied with this situation. In contrast to North Sámi respondents, the South Sámi respondents reported greater levels of difficulty with the language itself (since a higher proportion consists of L2 speakers) and a lower quality of literary outputs in the language (with grammatical mistakes and Norwegianisms). Again, in keeping with Sorjonen's (2019) findings regarding Finnish Sámi, our South Sámi respondents associated knowledge of the orthography with linguistic competence, equating the ability to write with mastery of grammar and vocabulary.

Skolt Sámi respondents read and write less often in their language than South and North Sámi respondents. As in the case of the other two groups, some respondents highlighted the importance of the orthography as a marker of linguistic identity. However, the Skolt Sámi cohort differed markedly from the North and South Sámi ones in that they expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with the orthography. Many respondents considered it to be overly complicated unless you know it well and have used it since childhood (cf. Sorjonen 2019), which older speakers had not had the opportunity to do. In contrast to the North Sámi speakers, who were generally at ease with the distancing orthographic model used for their language, many of the Skolt Sámi respondents expressed frustration at the special symbols used in their orthography. This could be due to a perceived overrepresentation, as the Skolt Sámi orthography makes finer phonemic distinctions than North Sámi. While only a minority in the North Sámi group mentioned a desire for the abolition of the special symbols, this was a very prominent issue raised by the Skolt Sámi group, suggesting that they perceive a higher level of complexity and/or have a lower level of training and familiarity with the orthography. The

complexity of the Skolt Sámi system might explain the expressed preference for greater identification with the majority national language, as opposed to a dislike of a distancing model *per se*.

It is to be hoped that this study could lead to further comparative research on Sámi orthographies. The number of respondents in our study was relatively low and not all Sámi languages or orthographies were included. Furthermore, there might have been a bias toward respondents who are keen writers and readers or even activists as the survey was conducted via Facebook pages rather than oral interviews. Some professional groups, such as language teachers or translators, or dialect areas, such as North Sámi in Finnmark, may have been overrepresented among our respondents. For this reason, we would welcome a further investigation of the following research questions: How would a quantitative study among a larger number of respondents correlate with our findings? Are Swedish North Sámi equally happy with the orthography or do they feel it is not fit for their purpose as it is not based on their dialect? How widely are the new Ume and Pite Sámi orthographies used? How do Kildin Sámi or Lule Sámi speakers use and view their orthographies? Does the launch of digital resources, such as the Skolt Sámi keyboard, change the use and evaluation of the orthography?

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