

Sami influence on Scandinavian revisited

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Traditionally, we assume little influence from the Sami languages on the grammar and phonology of neighbouring Scandinavian (North Germanic). This fits an unpleasant tradition of condescension towards the Sami. Since the Sami in the 19th and 20th century had so little prestige, they could hardly have influenced the Scandinavian languages?

Kusmenko (2008) shows convincingly that the prestige of the Sami and their language may have been very different up to at least 1300. More controversially, Kusmenko argues that several ‘deep’ grammatical and phonological features in North Germanic are due to Sami influence. They include the definiteness suffix (as in Norw. -en in *bilen* ‘car-def.sg[M]’), the s(t)-reflexive/middle/passive (as in Norw. *vaskes* ‘wash.inf.passive’), and ‘vowel balance’ (as in Norw. *vera* ‘be’, *jaga* ‘hunt’ where the infinitive ends in -a, unlike *lære* ‘teach’, *danse* ‘dance’, where it ends in -e).

These claims have divided the field. They are quoted favourably by Bull (2017), while Fridell (2019) finds them far-fetched and argues that plausible internal accounts can be found.

A plausible internal account does not automatically exclude an external one. Yet the literature suggests a scale of borrowability: In normal cases of language contact, we expect the lexicon to be affected before grammar, derivation before inflection, and ‘inherent’ inflection before ‘contextual’ (e.g. Gardani et al. 2015). If Sami has influenced Scandinavian grammar as deeply as argued by Kusmenko, one would expect extensive evidence of language contact also in the vocabulary. However, Magga 2005: 2117 says:

Influences from Sami on the Scandinavian languages is more limited [than the other way around]. The most numerous examples can be seen in place-names that have been given a Scandinavian form like *Kiruna* from NS [North Sami] Words denoting special Sami artifacts [...] *komager* ‘Sami summer brogue’ (NS *gáma* ‘shoe’), *joik* ‘Sami singing’ (*juoigat* ‘to sing in the Sami way’).

Unfortunately, Kusmenko does not really take the lexicon into consideration. Bull acknowledges this problem, but shows that loans from Sami are more numerous in the North than in the ‘standard’ language. Yet a desideratum remains an extensive list of loans denoting other things than place-names and Sami artifacts. Some attempts have been made, but I shall argue that they are insufficient, and that, given Kusmenko’s hypothesis, the evidence presented in support so far comes from less relevant dialects.

In a well-documented case of language contact, the Low German influence upon Scandinavian, traces are left in the derivational morphology of the ‘recipient’ language. I am not aware of any similar traces of extensive Sami influence.

Bull (2017) is right in arguing that scholars in Scandinavia have made themselves guilty of projecting the sociology of language in the 19th and 20th century on to different historical periods (and some even in outright chauvinism), and that Kusmenko’s work deserves serious attention. Unfortunately, the linguistic side of the story still leaves too many questions open.

References

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