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The Kven language:
An Overview of a Language in Context



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During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Anna-Kaisa Räisänen and Niina Kunnas, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about Kven in Norway.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

Table of Contents

1	INTRODUCTION: SPEAKERS OF THE KVEN LANGUAGE IN NORWAY.....	1
2	SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT	2
2.1	LEGAL AND POLITICAL POSITION	2
2.2	ATTITUDES	4
3	CULTURAL CONTEXT.....	5
4	LANGUAGE.....	7
4.1	GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE LANGUAGE	7
4.2	LANGUAGE CONTACT AND MULTILINGUALISM	9
4.3	LANGUAGE USE AND MAINTENANCE	10
5	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	12

1 Introduction: Speakers of the Kven language in Norway

The Kvens are an ethnic and linguistic minority in Northern Norway, the descendants of Finnish-speaking people who moved from the Finnish-speaking areas in Northern Sweden and Finland to the sparsely populated areas in Nord-Troms and Finnmark before 1945. The earliest references to the Kvens can be found as early as the 9th century, but as an ethnic group the Kvens occur in Danish-Norwegian registers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Niemi 1995: 149). The main Kven communities developed as a result of two main migration waves to Norway spanning three centuries. The first wave dates back to the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries and was a continuation of colonisation by Finnish-speaking people moving into northern Fenno-Scandia, particularly into Northern Troms County and into the western parts of Finnmark in Norway. The later migration in the 19th century was motivated mainly by the fishing industry and was concentrated in eastern Finnmark. (Niemi 1978.) The main Kven communities have been traditionally scattered over the wide coastal area of Northern Norway among the Sámi and Norwegian populations: in the Northern Troms county around the area of Lyngen Fjord, Nordreisa and Kvaenangen, and in the county of Finnmark in Alta, Porsanger, Tana, North Varanger and South Varanger.

In 1910, after the two migration periods, 7000 Kvens were registered as living in Northern Norway. The number of Kven language speakers was around 8000 in the 1930 census, whereas in the 1950 census only 1400 people reported that they used the Finnish language. After that Norwegian censuses have recorded neither the number of ethnic Kvens nor the number of Kven language speakers. Because of the lack of official statistics, all numbers relating to ethnic Kvens and speakers of Kven language are estimations. The Norwegian organisation of Kvens (*Norske Kveners Forbund/Ruijan Kveeniliitto*) has estimated their number to be as high as 50,000, but according to the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development there are 10,000 to 15,000 ethnic Kvens in Norway. The estimations of Kven language speakers also vary considerably. The number of people who speak or

understand Kven or Finnish has recently been estimated to around 10,000 (Ruijan Kveeniliitto 2008), but according to Lindgren (1993: 21) in the 1980s the estimated number of those who used the minority language actively in traditional Kven communities was between 1500 and 2000.

The Kvens have not traditionally used the ethnonym Kven, but it has been widely used as an exonym by Norwegians (Niemi 1991). Instead of the common ethnonym, Kvens have categorised themselves either according to locality or residence, *pyssyjokinen*, *annijokinen*, *pykealainen* ('coming from/living in Pyssyjoki / Annijoki / Pykea') or according to Finnish ancestors *finskættede*, *finskættet* ('of Finnish family/origin') or *finne* in Norwegian and *ruijansuomalainen* ('Finnmark Finn(ish)') or *suomenlähtöinen* ('of Finnish origin') in Finnish (Saressalo 1996). During the late 1980s and 1990s Kvens held a widespread debate about whether they could be called Kvens or Norwegians with Finnish ancestors (*ruijansuomalaiset*) (Anttonen 1999). Even though the name Kven is the ethnic label mainly used nowadays to refer to the minority in official contexts, not all who could be included in the minority identify themselves as Kvens, some preferring and using the term Norwegian Finns. Consequently, the definition of the ethnonym Kven includes a reference to a person's self-identification and a definition of their ethnic background (Hyltenstam 2003). However, the problems encountered in trying to define the ethnic identities of individuals do not emerge only from the debate around the ethnonym, but also from the multilayered and multidimensional backgrounds of the people who live in Northern Norway: many members of the Kven minority could identify themselves simultaneously as Kvens, Norwegians and Sámis (Lindgren, Eskeland and Normann 2003).

2 Socio-political Context

2.1 Legal and Political Position

Norway signed the *European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages* in 1993 and submitted the instrument of ratification in the same year. The charter entered into force in 1998, and it commits Norway to "promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture and to preserve the essential

elements of their identity, region, language and cultural heritage.” The Kvens have had the status of a national minority since 1996, and the Kven language was recognised as a minority language in Norway in 2005. Now, in 2012 the protected languages under the charter are: the Kven language, and two non-territorial languages, Romani and Romanes. The Sámi languages are indigenous languages in Norway.

Although Norway has signed and ratified the *European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages*, it has no specific laws or law concerning the position of the Kvens as a national minority. However, there are laws that affect the Kvens and their language: the National Legislation, the Education Act, the Nomenclature Act, the Law for Justice in Society, the Cultural Heritage Act and the Human Rights Act. The Education Act and the Nomenclature Act both give special language rights to the Kven minority: the first gives the right to study Kven or Finnish as a second language in the Troms and Finnmark counties, and the second gives the right to use place names on official signs and maps in the Kven or Finnish language. The purpose of the Nomenclature Act has been to protect local place names as cultural heritage, and it ensures the right to use the minority languages for place names in the speaking areas of the Kven and Sami languages, but up till now (2012) the Kven and Finnish languages are used for official signs only in Porsanger and Vadsø, and only a few maps exist with Kven place names. The Education Act gives also the right to study Kven or Finnish in primary and lower secondary schools in Troms and Finnmark. The act does not stipulate or regulate the use of a particular language or languages for general teaching purposes in school, nor the choice of languages for language teaching in schools, but it does open up opportunities for those pupils who have Kven or Finnish ancestors. Nevertheless, the provision of general schooling which gives the right to study the minority language depends on the activity and demands of the Kven pupils themselves and of their parents. (See also Granholm 2012.)

There have been some controversies and official debates about the Kven minority, its status and their language in Norway since the 1980s. The main questions have concerned the status of the Kven language as an independent language and the language used in schools and higher education (Anttonen 1999). The debate has appeared in newspapers and internet forums, and official discussions have also been organised by the Norwegian Kven Organisation, the Norwegian-Finnish Organisation and some minority institutions. When the

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages came into force in Norway in 1998, the language of the Kvens was defined as Kven/Finnish, but in 2005 (see page 3) the denomination was changed to “the Kven language”. However, because Norwegian-Finnish organisations do not accept the term Kven as an ethnonym or as the denomination of their language, they have demanded that the Finnish language in Norway should receive the same 2nd degree protection afforded by the *European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages of the Council of Europe* that is already enjoyed by the Kven language.

2.2 Attitudes

The significant aspect to remember when looking at the context of this complex social, demographic, political and linguistic situation is that originally, from the 17th century to the mid 19th century, the attitude of the Norwegian majority and politicians towards the Kven settlers was quite positive, but the public attitudes of Norwegian society towards the Kvens and their language steadily changed over time. Before the 19th and 20th centuries, Kven was one of the languages of trilingual villages and it was used for communication between, for example, the Sámi and Kvens. Then, in the 19th century, the first major shift in people’s attitudes towards the Kven language happened as a result of new national policies and the rise of Norwegian nationalism. Because the aim of nationalism was to create a homogeneous nation, minorities such as the Sámi people and the Kvens were to be assimilated into the Norwegian majority. This ideology resulted in prejudices and negative attitudes within both the minority and the majority population, and the Kvens went through the assimilation process from the late 19th century until the end of World War II, at which time the integration into the Norwegian majority society was judged as being ostensibly successful. After this long assimilation period the Kvens became ‘the silent people’, both in their society and in the research field. (Niemi 1994)

The second change in attitudes and policies toward minorities began in Norway in the 1960s, and continued until Norway recognised the Kven minority as a national minority in Norway, although the larger society had started to show a more pluralistic approach towards the Sami people already in the 1950s (Niemi 2006: 416, 418). The Kvens only became more

visible again in the 1970s as a result of the ethnic revival of minorities in Norway, especially the revival of the Sámi people. Along with Sámi activism in Norway and Tornedalian activism in Sweden, Kvens began to demand rights for themselves. Then, in the years after 1980, a time of increasing ethno-political movement can be observed among the Kvens. In 1987 the Kvens founded the Kven Association (*Norske Kveners Forbund*), which has had a significant role as the binding force of the ethnic rising, and the Kvens have increasingly asserted their agenda within Norwegian society.

Due to the assimilation policies, a negative image of the Kven language spread within many groups, for instance, among the Kvens themselves, the Norwegians, new immigrants and even the Finnish people in Finland (Lindgren 2003:165). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the general attitude towards Kvens and the Sámi people had been negative and the aim has been to absorb them into Norwegian society. As a result of these same assimilation policies, being a Kven acquired a stigma, and people became ashamed of their language and culture. (Niemi 1994; Lane 2010.) According to Megard (1999), many of those aged 60 or older still have a negative attitude towards the ethnonym Kven because they probably carry the burden of the time of the assimilation, when the word Kven was a word of derision. Those under 40, on the other hand, have a largely positive response to the ethnonym. In addition, those who are not proficient in the Kven language have a more positive attitude towards the ethnonym than those who are proficient (Megard 1999: 116 – 118).

3 Cultural Context

The markers of being a Kven are defined as the following: knowing the language, having Kven family ties, having ethnographic (partly historic) characteristics, and the desire to identify with the Kven minority (Saressalo 1996). The symbols of Kven culture, such as the sauna, are connected to the traditional form of living, but the Kvens have tried to develop some new, modern cultural symbols. Most of the original physical manifestations of Kven culture and history vanished, as a result of the German army burning almost everything in their path as they retreated from Lapland at the end of World War II in 1944 and 1945, resulting in a total of 11,000 homes being lost in Norway alone. (Lane 2010) In the middle of

the 1990s, some efforts were made to create an official flag for the Kvens, but to this day the flag has not been taken into active use. Since 2002 Kvens have had their own national costume, created to strengthen the ethnic identity of the minority, and fashioned after the period clothing of the 1880s to the 1920s. The costume is used in festivals and other ceremonial events where Kvens gather together to celebrate.

The Kvens have two centres for Kven culture and language: the Kven Institute in Børselv and the Halti Kvenkultursenter in Nordreisa. However, these cultural centres are not easily accessible to all Kvens because they live so far away. In addition, the Ruija Kven Museum in Vadsø functions as the museum responsible for Kven culture in Norway, and the trilingual language centre in Storfjord reinforce multilingualism in the surrounding villages. The first festival celebrating Kven culture, *Baaskifestivalen*, was arranged for the first time in 2007. The festival occurs in June and the programme has included, among other things, concerts, seminars, auctions and a fair, where one can buy Kven handicrafts and traditional Kven dishes. Another important festival for Kvens is the *Kipparin festivaali* arranged in the village of Børselv in the last week of July. The programme has included Kven soccer, language immersion, presentations, panel discussions, concerts, movies, cultural evenings, and a church service in the Kven language. A Kven Idol and a Kven language Grand Prix have been arranged within the minority festivals to increase the use of the Kven language in song lyrics.

Two novels have been written in Kven language to this date. The author of these books is Alf Børsskog-Nilsen. The first novel, *Kuosuvaaran takana* ('Beyond the Kuosuvaara hill') was published in 2004, and the second part of the intended trilogy, *Aittiruto*, was published in 2008. The first two collections of poems in the Kven language were also written by Alf Børsskog-Nilsen. In addition, Agnes Eriksen has written some works of minor fiction in Kven, and Olav Beddari has written short stories in his local Finnish/Kven dialect. The most well-known "Kven writers", Idar Kristiansen, Hans Kristian Eriksen and Bente Pedersen, have written about the Kvens in Norwegian. They have all had an important role for the creation of the Kven minority identity and the assertion of ethnic self-esteem. (See Bogetvedt 1998 and Maliniemi Lindbach 2001.)

During the past two centuries religion has been a significant part of Kven culture. The most prevailing religious revivalist movement among the Kvens has been the Laestadian movement. It has, in fact, been said that it is the position of the Finnish language as the

lingua sacra that has promoted the survival of the Kven language, in spite of the strong assimilation policies of Norway. During the period of assimilation, the religious meetings were almost the only opportunities the Kvens had to speak and hear their own language in public contexts outside of their private milieu. The Laestadian movement has been seen as the unifying force for the Kvens and as a therapeutic outlet, helping the minority endure its plight. Over time, the Laestadian movement has become a multilingual revivalist movement; it plays no role as an agent of division between ethnic groups, nor does it any longer have the social standing and power to preserve the Kven language.

4 Language

4.1 General description of the language

The Kven language is one of the Finnic languages, and belongs linguistically to the Finnish dialect continuum, but there are many structural, phonological and lexical differences between Kven and Finland Finnish dialects (Sulkala 1999: 218–219). Meänkieli, which is spoken in Northern Sweden along with some northern dialects of Finnish, is the language most closely related to Kven, and these northern minority languages are mutually intelligible to the most speakers of the Finnish dialects. Kven is an agglutinative language, which means that to express tense, mood, number, and person, affixes are attached to the word stem (Lane 2006). Kven has acquired many loan words not only from Norwegian and Swedish but also from the Sámi languages. The vocabulary of modern life has for the most part been borrowed from Norwegian.

The Kven language has survived for a long time in oral use inside the private domains and within certain professions, like fishing and hunting. It has been associated most closely with pre-modern times, (men's) occupations, and masculinity. Female speakers of Kven shifted their minority language to the Norwegian, and they did not pass their minority language to the next generation (Lindgren, Eskeland and Normann 2003).

Attitudes toward the Kven language have not been studied systematically, but according to Hyltenstam (2003: 47) the Kvens' repressed role in relation to the Norwegians and other minorities has resulted in successive generations of Kvens having learned to devalue their

language and culture. During the assimilation some Kvens began to attach adjectives such as 'inferior' and 'mixed' to their language. Furthermore, the language was neither thought of as a 'proper language' nor as 'proper Finnish' (Lindgren 2003: 165). Although positive attitudes towards the Kven language have significantly increased during the last 30 years, such demeaning evaluations are still to be encountered.

Attempts to standardise the Kven language started in 2007, when the Kven Language Council (*språkråd*), the language expert body, was established. A year later the Kven Institute assembled the *språkting*, a panel of representatives of language users from different Kven districts. Both organs operated under the Kven Institute, until they ceased to exist in 2009. The purpose of the Council was to develop the Kven language and especially to make proposals to the *språkting* concerning the spelling, the grammar and new vocabulary creation in the language. The Council prepared various sample texts in Kven based on the different dialects of the language. The alternatives the Council introduced were: to create a written language based on the few recognised Kven dialects by choosing forms which are common to most of them; to take one dialect as a starting point; to develop a standard close to Meänkieli; to develop a standard close to or clearly different from Standard Finnish. The *språkting* decided that the best suitable standard for the Kven language could be created by choosing forms common to most Kven dialects and to bring the standard closer together with Meänkieli.

The standardisation process has also roused lively debate in the local media. Some people support the standardisation process but disapprove of the name Kven for the language; others support both; and yet others think it would be better to use Standard Finnish as the standard written medium. Furthermore, some fear that their particular dialect will be ignored in the standardisation process, and some even doubt whether the opinions of lay people have been taken sufficiently into account by experts and decision-makers in the Council. (<http://www.kvensk institutt.no/sprak/spraknemnd>)

4.2 *Language contact and multilingualism*

In the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, many villages in Northern Norway were bilingual; people speaking either Kven and Norwegian or Sámi and Norwegian, and some areas were even trilingual, with people able to speak Kven, Sámi and Norwegian (Aikio 1989). However, due to the strong assimilation policy this situation changed little by little. (Lindgren 1999: 146–147.) The language suppression continued until the point was reached that Kvens born in the 1960s and 1970s were mainly brought up as monolingual Norwegian speakers. In the preceding decades, according to Lane (2010), the Kven language had not been transferred from parents to children. Yet from the beginning of the 1980s onwards some children have been able to learn Finnish or Kven in school. In other words, the assimilation policy has led to the current situation in Kven communities, where predominantly only the older generation is bi- or trilingual in Kven, Norwegian and Sámi, and where the middle-aged generation, having been brought up monolingually, understand but don't speak Kven. Nowadays, only those children of the youngest generation who are taught Kven or Finnish using the “language nest” (early immersion) method in kindergarten, or those who study Kven or Finnish as a second language, are growing up to be bilingual, to some extent, in Norwegian and Finnish or Kven. The fact that many children are schooled bilingually these days is a result of modern bilingual research, which has increased the awareness of the advantages of bilingualism.

Before the end of the 19th century and the period of assimilation (the Norwegianisation), there were some areas in Northern Norway where the Kven, Sámi and Norwegian languages were actually quite equal in their social standing. Kven, as well as Sámi and Norwegian, was used as a vehicular language between the different ethnic groups, and in some villages people who worked in the fishing industry had to learn Kven in order to be able to work effectively in these professions. The assimilation politics changed the situation dramatically: the Sámi and Kven people and languages became undervalued and deprived; Norwegian became the dominant language, and Kven and Sámi became endangered. Previously language contact situations were also different. Kven speakers commonly adopted elements from both the North Sámi language and Norwegian. More elements from the North Sámi languages have in fact been incorporated into the Kven language than into Finnish, probably

because in Finland Sámi was clearly the language of the minority from the very beginning, while in Norway Sámi and Kven were on an equal standing from the beginning. The influence of North Sámi was particularly strong in the Western Kven dialects (Virtaranta 1980). Anrdeassen (2003) has shown that Eastern dialects also have many influences from Sámi, especially in the vocabulary. Today, however, most of the influences exerted on the Kven language are by Norwegian.

It has been said that all language contact phenomena, including code-switching, loan translations and loan words, are typical characteristics of Kven (Huss 1999: 170). Many words have been borrowed from the Norwegian and Sámi languages, but new words have also been formed using original elements. The loan words from the Sámi language deal most often with sea and inland waters, as well as words related to geographical elements. Administrative terms, on the other hand, are taken from Norwegian, for example, *möötti* 'meeting' (*møte* in Norwegian), as well as words related to the food industry, modern life, technology and societal developments. In addition to these contact features, the characteristic feature to all Kven dialects is a wide and multifaceted linguistic variation (Lindgren 1999:143).

4.3 Language use and maintenance

A widespread language shift from Kven to Norwegian happened in Kven within communities after the middle of the 19th century. Today, however, one can talk of a modest reverse language switch (Huss 1999). At least in some Kven communities, children are attempting to learn the language of their grandparents, and they are showing an interest in their grandparents' heritage. The majority of Kven speakers (mostly 60 years old and older) use the Kven language as their everyday language, and no signs of attrition are visible among them. (Lane 2010.) Middle-aged Kvens, on the other hand, have often only a passive knowledge of the language, though some are able to use the language to a limited extent with, for example, Finnish tourists and use Kven as a code language. Young people (under 30 years old) rarely speak Kven, but nowadays children in Børselv can learn Kven in their primary school. The number of people who are able to speak Kven fluently, as native

speakers, decreases as older people continue to pass away. Nevertheless, Kven is still used daily by the elderly.

The language shift from Kven to Norwegian, and the decreasing number of Kven speakers, has also made the language itself less visible. There is evidence that at the end of the 20th century the language awareness of minority language users in the Kven villages was quite weak. It has even been reported, quite often, that people have known each other for years without realising that they both spoke Kven. Sollid (2003) has also pointed out that although children and young people can and do study Kven language at school, this has not encouraged and contributed to the actual active use of language outside schools. It remains to be seen whether children who study the language in primary school will retain their language proficiency later in their lives. However, the revitalisation of Kven and the discussion that has been going on in the media has had a positive impact on the linguistic identities of Kvens. Those who can speak the language have started to use the language more boldly, and this results in at least increased awareness about the minority language in the Kven region.

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