

Methodological challenges in working with Indigenous communities

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In their epistemological article, Grenoble and Osipov (2023, henceforth G&O) touch on some of the practical and ideological difficulties in working with Indigenous communities, in particular in relation to their work with the Even communities in northeastern Russia. They mention low speaker numbers and the associated challenge of obtaining sufficient data, the practical difficulties of reaching these communities (both physically and digitally), the existing skepticism in Indigenous communities towards western notions of measurement, and the need to acknowledge the difficult histories that Indigenous people have faced since being colonized. Based on our own work with the Indigenous Sámi populations in northern Norway and Sweden, we fully endorse their experiences and views, despite some differences pointed out below. We also wish to add another aspect, namely the attitudes, values and existing power struggles in our own scientific community, which not only make it hard to do research on small populations in the first place but, ultimately, prevent this research from getting the visibility it deserves.

At first glance, there are some obvious similarities between the Sámi and the Even communities. Both traditionally inhabited the far north, were migratory, and engaged in reindeer herding. In both cases, language shift has occurred as a result of harsh assimilation policies, leading to migration to urban centers and, in the majority of people, to language loss (Aikio-Puoskari, 2018); today, no monolingual speakers of either language group remain. However, in terms of language vitality, we are dealing with two very different settings. In the case of Even, of which only around 4,000 speakers remain, high proficiencies are found only in the older generation, or in what G&O term ‘traditional speakers’. Perhaps understandably, given the low number of remaining speakers, the focus of G&O’s article is on documenting *language change* as a process, rather than considering factors that would facilitate the revitalization of the Even language. In their study, participants’ production of word order, noun and case marking is scored against the backdrop of a – one could say, slightly idealized – baseline compiled from references grammars, dictio-

naries, and texts. Based on their accuracy on these tasks, speakers are classified as ‘traditional’ (i.e., “with little to no deviation from the grammars as described in the standard references”), ‘attriting’, ‘shifting’ or ‘innovative’.

The situation for the Sámi languages looks somewhat better, with an estimated 20,000–30,000 speakers remaining, though the vitality differs greatly depending on the Sámi language in question, and the vast majority are North Sámi speakers. Over the past few decades, the Swedish and Norwegian states have increasingly acknowledged – to varying degrees – the need for Sámi language revitalization measures and for Sámi political representation. Today, residents in Sámi municipalities have the right to communicate with public authorities in a Sámi language, and they can (ideally) send their children to a school that teaches Sámi as a foreign language or as a language of instruction (Vangsnes, 2022). Numerous policies have been enacted that aim at reversing state-inflicted language shift (Aikio-Puoskari 2018; Svonni 2008). There is a lot at stake at this point, beyond documenting a language that is doomed to extinction, as things could still go either way. We dare to suggest, as a result, that there is a greater urgency for research that not only documents language change, but also informs policymakers on the types of measures that are needed to facilitate revitalization. The ‘luxury’ in the context of the Sámi is that it is possible to obtain larger datasets – even remote areas in Northern Scandinavia have internet access – and (psycho)linguistic methods need not be confined to a university lab. For example, as we have shown, vocabulary tasks can be carried out in just a few minutes online, so that a fair number of language users can be motivated to participate (e.g., Gyllstad et al., under review, was based on 289 Sámi speakers, 137 of which were ethnic Sámi). Moreover, it is possible to design tasks that do not rely on written language, such as short speech recordings using online recording software, which can be used for accent studies and acoustic analyses (Kupisch et al., under review.). These objective data can be paired with questionnaires on language experience, which participants can take in their majority language – the language in which they often feel more comfortable reading and writing – so that passive users are not discouraged from participation (e.g., Lloyd-Smith et al., under review, was based on more than 500 Sámi participants). Questionnaire data is arguably less reliable, and may be less interesting to linguists than true language data, but quality checks can be done in combination with objective data. This way, we can generate valuable estimates of how much speaker potential there is, including those who had no opportunities to develop their linguistic heritage – thus, the kind of data that should be interesting to the Indigenous communities themselves as well as other stakeholders.



At the same time, our experience as researchers working with the Sámi community is that there exist high ideological barriers to quantitative data collection,

though not in the Indigenous communities themselves, as suggested by G&O, but rather in scientific communities and, to a lesser degree, Indigenous authorities, who either perceive a higher entitlement to do the work, or who wish to protect the communities from such research. For example, when reaching out to fellow groups of (non-Indigenous) researchers working with the Sámi, one may find oneself being advised against doing this research, since the community is 'over-researched' or, in a specific case, because the consulted research group had themselves already been preparing to field a study for several years. Research groups may signal disinterest in collaboration, even though their own expertise (e.g., ethnographic and qualitative) combined with that of the other group (e.g., psycholinguistic and quantitative) could result in a mixed-method approach, as proposed by G&O, and in qualitatively superior research. We cannot help but wonder: Is this about shielding the Indigenous community, or is it about who is entitled to fish in certain waters? Shouldn't it be up to the Indigenous group itself to decide which researchers they trust, and whether they want to participate? Arguably, this shielding position is paradoxical to getting the kind of data that would be needed to inform policymakers on topics relating to language revitalization, in particular in relation to which policies are working.

There is an additional concern that, also paradoxically, impairs visibility both within the scientific community as well as in the general public and potential stakeholders, namely the publication standards in our own field. While we all agree that certain methodological standards must be upheld, it is, depending on the target population, nearly impossible for Indigenous studies to produce quantitative studies with more than 50 participants that include monolingual controls and yield statistically significant results. To provide one example, it may be the case that several studies based on various small populations test for one effect and repeatedly show a specific trend, albeit statistically non-significant, either due to small sample size or because the trend is only visible for a small number of speakers. Meta-studies are impossible due to lack of statistical details. Should we conclude that the effect is not there, or should we highlight that the trend has been shown repeatedly and consider the possibility that it might be meaningful? The latter solution may be more sensible, but hard to publish in (psycho)linguistic journals with high visibility, which adhere to certain methodological standards. These standards may simply not be possible with Indigenous populations. This, in turn, may discourage young, talented researchers from embarking on such research. Research on Indigenous languages is more time-consuming and riskier: the quantitative output may not suffice for a high impact publication, and it may take several years until the research is published, a timeline that may not suit young scientists who depend on publications to find academic positions. However, we wish to point out that there is more to Indigenous research than advanc-


ing research methodology, and that absence of large samples must not equal absence of terminological rigor. Furthermore, it is a context in which we, as linguists, can attend to our responsibilities, feed back into society and produce tools and findings that can empower the less powerful.

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