

SWEDISH-SPEAKING POPULATION AS AN ETHNIC GROUP IN FINLAND

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POVZETEK

ŠVEDSKO GOVOREČE PREBIVALSTVO KOT ETNIČNA SKUPNOST NA FINSKEM

Prispevek obravnava švedsko govoreče prebivalstvo na Finskem, ki izkazuje kot manjšina, sebi lastne zakonitosti v rasti, populacijski strukturi in geografski razporeditvi. Obravnava tudi učinke mešanih zakonov in vključuje tudi vedno aktualne razprave o uporabi finskega jezika na Finskem.

Tako v absolutnem kot relativnem smislu upadata število in delež švedskega prebivalstva na Finskem. Zadnji dostopni podatki govorijo o 296 840 prebivalcih oziroma 6 % deležu Švedov v skupnem številu Finske narodnosti. Švedska poselitev je nadpovprečno zgoščena na jugu in zahodu države. Stalen upad števila članov švedske narodnostne skupnosti gre pripisati emigraciji, internim migracijskim tokovom, mešanim zakonom in upadu fertilitnosti prebivalstva. Tudi starostna struktura švedskega prebivalstva ne govori v prid lastni reprodukciji. Odločilnega pomena je tudi, da so pripadniki švedske narodnosti v povprečju bolj izobraženi kot Finci. Pred kratkim se je zastavilo vprašanje ali je potrebno v finskih šolah ohranjati švedščino kot obvezen učni predmet.

Introduction

Finland is a bilingual country, with Finnish and Swedish as the official languages of the republic. The Swedish-speaking population is defined as Finnish citizens who live in Finland and speak Swedish as their mother tongue, 'mothertongue' regarded as the language of which the person in question has the best command. Children still too young to speak are registered according to the native tongue of their parents, principally of the mother (Fougstedt 1981: 22).

Finland's Swedish-speaking population is here discussed as a minority group: what kind of a population group they form, and how this group differs in population structure from the total population. The article also describes the geographical distribution and the effect of marriages to the Swedish-speaking population. The last chapter concentrates on the question of bilingualism in Finland, a problem which

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from time to time emerges as a source of public debate. The research is based on statistical data.

Population Development and Geographical Distribution

In the 20th century, the number of Finland's Swedish-speaking population remained nearly constant until World War II (Figure 1), reaching its peak of 354 000 people in 1940. The relative proportion of this population group has, however, steadily decreased, and after World War II the Swedish-speaking population began to decline also quantitatively. In 1960 the number was still around 330 000; but the 1960's brought an increase in both internal migration and emigration and a decrease in fertility, and consequently the Swedish-speaking population was reduced by nearly 30 000 people. In the 1970's the decline again slowed down. According to the latest available information, the Swedish-speaking population makeup 6 % of Finland's total population, equalling to 296 840 people (see Nieminen 1983: 7). In comparison, some 93 % of Finland's population speak Finnish as their mother tongue, while less than 1 % have some other first language (e.g. Lappish, English, German, Russian).

Finnish municipalities, 460 in number, are classified according to their prevailing language, as Finnish-speaking, bilingual, or Swedish-speaking. Finnish-speaking municipalities form the majority with 86 %. Bilingual municipalities make up 9 %, Finnish and Swedish each being the majority language in a half of these. The remaining 5 % are Swedish-speaking municipalities; for example, all of the 16 municipalities in Åland Islands are Swedish-speaking. According to Finland's language legislation, a municipality is considered bilingual if at least 8 % or 3000 of its inhabitants speak the minority language; otherwise the municipality is considered unilingual. A bilingual municipality cannot be registered as unilingual unless the proportion of the minority language group drops to 6 % (Fougstedt 1981: 22).

Swedish is the prevailing language in the southern and western coastal areas of Finland (Figure 2). In 1989 the Swedish-speaking formed the highest proportion of the population in Åland Islands (nearly 95 %) and in the provinces of Vaasa (about 23 %) and Uusimaa (over 11 %). In quantitative terms the Swedish-speaking population primarily lives in Uusimaa (close to 140 000) and in the province of Vaasa (more than 100 000). In other words, the Swedish-speaking population is very concentrated geographically, and there are large areas in Finland with practically no Swedish-speaking population.

The Swedish-speaking areas have seen much stronger emigration than the Finnish-speaking ones. As an example, the net migration loss in the 1950's was annually 1.6 per mile in the whole country, while in the Swedish-speaking areas it was around 10 per mile (Nieminen 1983: 19). Emigration turned favourable to Finland in the early 1980's. Emigration to the Nordic countries has been relatively more popu-

lar in Swedish-speaking and primarily Swedish bilingual municipalities (88%) than in the other Finnish municipalities (71%) (cf. Fischer & Straubhaar 1991: 8). Similarly, immigrants from the other Nordic countries have more often preferred the Swedish-speaking and primarily Swedish bilingual municipalities (84%) than the Finnish municipalities (62%). In addition, returning to Finland from the Nordic countries has been less common among the Swedish-speaking than Finnish-speaking emigrants; already their mother tongue makes it easier for the Swedish-speaking to adapt to the new living conditions.

The decline in the Swedish-speaking population is, moreover, partly promoted by mixed marriages after which the language of one spouse changes and the children begin to speak Finnish. On an average 60% of the children from mixed marriages become Finnish-speaking, 40% Swedish-speaking (Nieminen 1983: 22). Studies indicate that when the father speaks Swedish and the mother Finnish, 65% of the children speak Finnish; when the mother speaks Swedish and the father Finnish, 51% of the children become Finnish-speaking. In other words, the language of the mother has a stronger influence than that of the father (De Geer 1981: 84). Some 1000 mixed marriages are contracted every year: in 60% of these the husband speaks Swedish, the wife Finnish. Unilingual Swedish marriages numbered 775 in the year 1988.

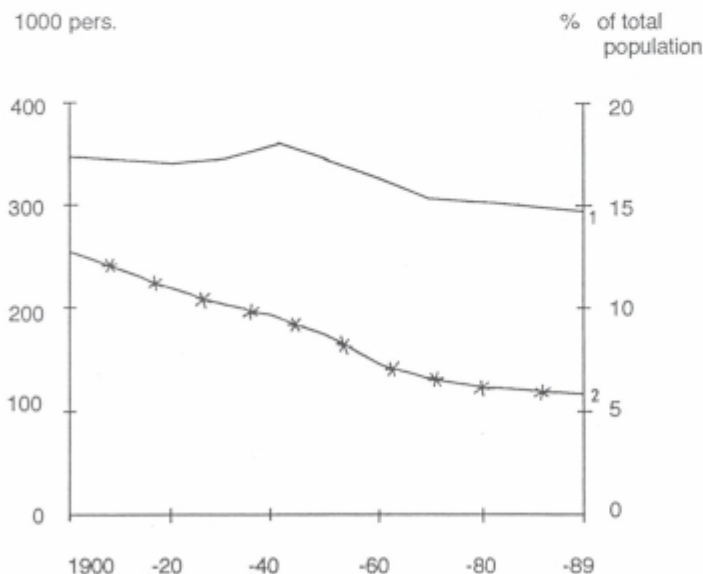


Figure 1: Swedish-speaking population in Finland from 1900 to 1989.

(1) Quantitative development, (2) relative development.

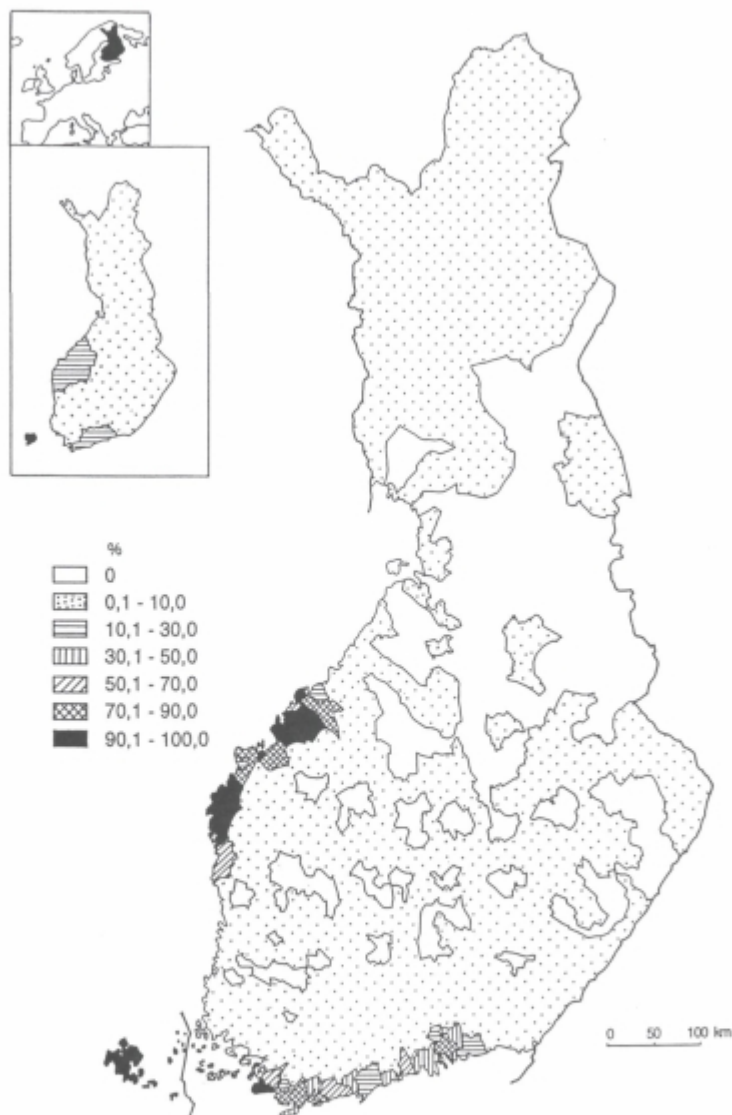


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of the Swedish-speaking population in Finland, by province and municipality, in 1989 (% of total populatio),

Population Structure

The increase in the proportion of the elderly population (ageing of the population structure) has been stronger within Finland's Swedish-speaking population than in the whole country (Figure 3). This development is caused by the lower fertility and mortality of the Swedish-speaking, the higher emigration, and language shifts caused by marriages (Nieminen 1983: 8). In 1989 the share of the elderly (65 years and older) was 20% among the Swedish-speaking, while the corresponding figure for the entire population was 13%. The share of the very old (75 years and older) was particularly striking among the female population. The proportions of children of 0 to 14 years were more equal: 17% among the Swedish-speaking, 19% in the whole country.

The geographical age structure of the population also proves that the Swedish-speaking population on an average is older than the total population (Figure 4). In the Åland Islands the differences are small, as the majority of the population there speaks Swedish; and also the entire population of the province of Northern Karelia is as aged as the tiny local Swedish-speaking minority. The relative number of children, on the other hand, displays considerable regional differences. Especially in the northern and central provinces the proportion of children was significantly higher in the whole population than among the Swedish-speaking population.

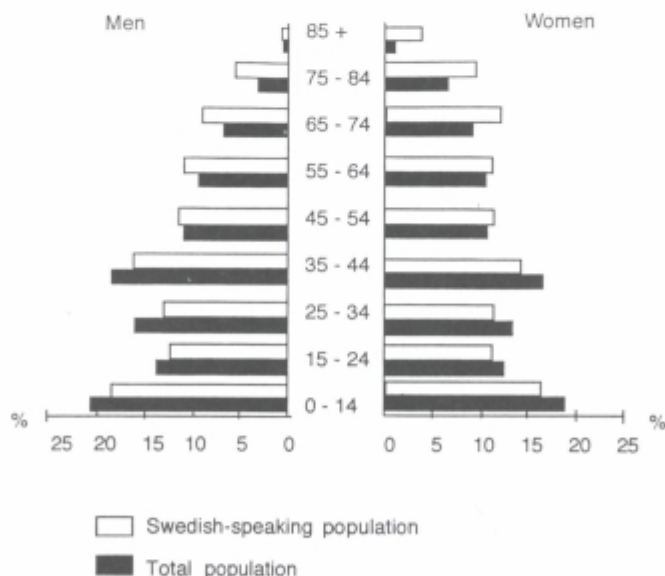


Figure 3: Age and sex structure of the Swedish-speaking and total population in Finland, 1989.

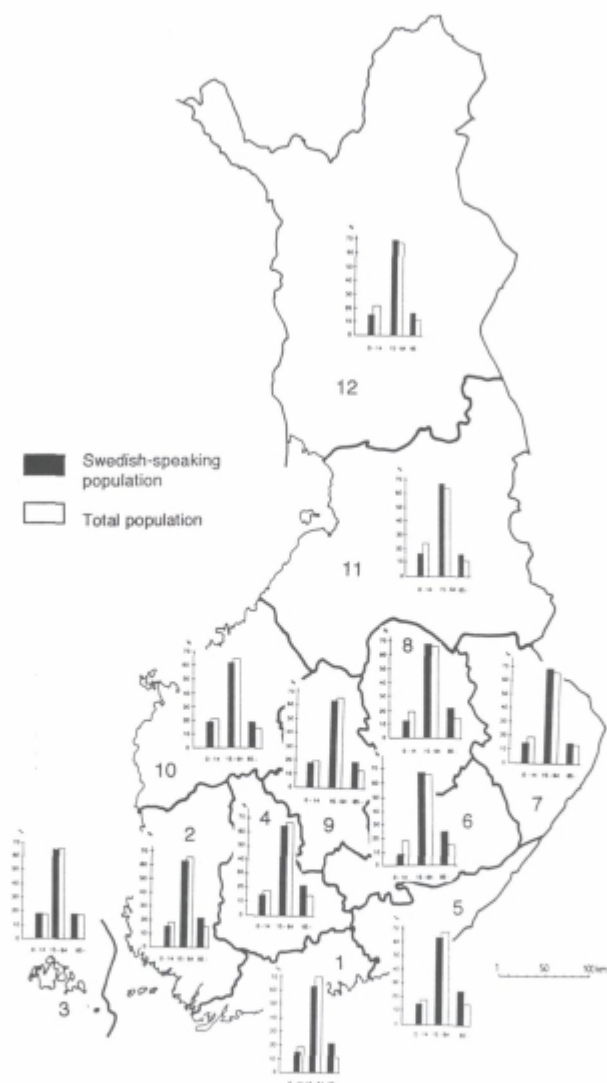


Figure 4: Age and sex structure of the Swedish-speaking and total population in Finland by province, 1989. (a) Swedish-speaking population, (b) total population. Provinces: (1) Uusimaa, (2) Turku and Pori, (3) Åland Islands, (4) Häme, (5) Kymi, (6) Mikkeli, (7) Northern Karelia, (8) Kuopio, (9) Central Finland, (10) Vaasa, (11) Oulu, (12) Lapland.

The occupational structure of the Swedish-speaking employed labour is somewhat different from that of the entire employed labour force (Figure 5). In 1985 the Swedish-speaking people were remarkably well represented in the fields of agriculture and forestry, trade, and transport and communications, whereas in the other occupations the share of the Swedish was below the Finnish average. Education statistics indicate that a higher degree education is more common among the Swedish-speaking employed labour (Figure 6): in 1985 around 30 % of the Swedish-speaking employed labour had received at least the lowest level of higher education, while this figure was 20 % for the entire employed labour force.

Discussion

The decline in Finland's Swedish-speaking population – both numerical and relative – has aroused debate of the necessity for official bilingualism in Finland and of the rights of the Swedish-speaking population. The disappearance of the Swedish-speaking minority is by some people considered only a matter of time (see Finnäs 1990: 77). Equal to the Finnish population, the right of the Swedish-speaking to use their mother tongue is guaranteed by law, and certain education quotas ensure them services in their own native tongue, Swedish (Hakulinen & Saari 1993).

Finland has a Swedish-speaking university, the Åbo Akademi, founded in 1918. The Swedish People's Party in Finland established in 1906 has been actively promoting the language rights of the Swedish-speaking Finns. In 1907 the Party decided to celebrate an annual "Swedish Day" (Svenska dagen) on the 6th of November, a day named after the Swedish conqueror king Gustavus II Adolphus. A number of newspapers in Swedish appear in Finland, *Hufvudstandsbladet* being the largest of them. In addition, Finland has several Swedish-speaking theatres (Lönnqvist 1981: 23–25).

The value of the Swedish language has been questioned in the recent discussion, mainly because it is not considered sufficiently useful as a medium of international communication. Compulsory teaching of a language needed only in the Nordic countries is regarded a waste of resources (Hakulinen & Saari 1993), and numerous opinions have been presented, demanding that Swedish should be made an optional language. According to an opinion poll by the Economic Research Centre for the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity, 71 % of Finns maintain that Swedish should be made optional in the comprehensive school, and 5 % of the interviewees said Swedish should not be taught at all. Compulsory teaching of Swedish was most often supported by people who vote either the Swedish People's Party in Finland or the National Coalition Party. The Swedish People's Party in Finland has its strongest support in the Swedish-speaking areas of Finland (Stenbäck 1993).

Also opposite opinions have been heard, emphasizing the necessity for Swedish: its status as an official language in Finland is a clear manifestation of Finland's iden-

tification with the Nordic countries, of the feeling that our roots are there (Hakulinen & Saari 1993). It should here be noted that Finland has given a suggestion to Sweden, requiring that Sweden's Finnish speaking population should receive similar minority rights as those granted to the Lappish people in Sweden. This would mean, in effect, acknowledging Sweden's Finnish population as an official minority group.

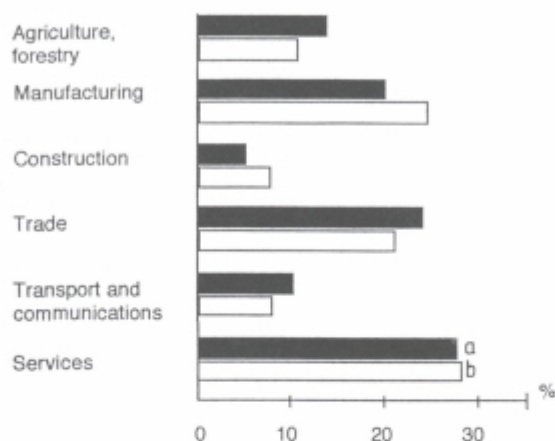


Figure 5: Swedish-speaking and total employed labour by occupation, 1985. (a) Swedish-speaking, (b) whole country.

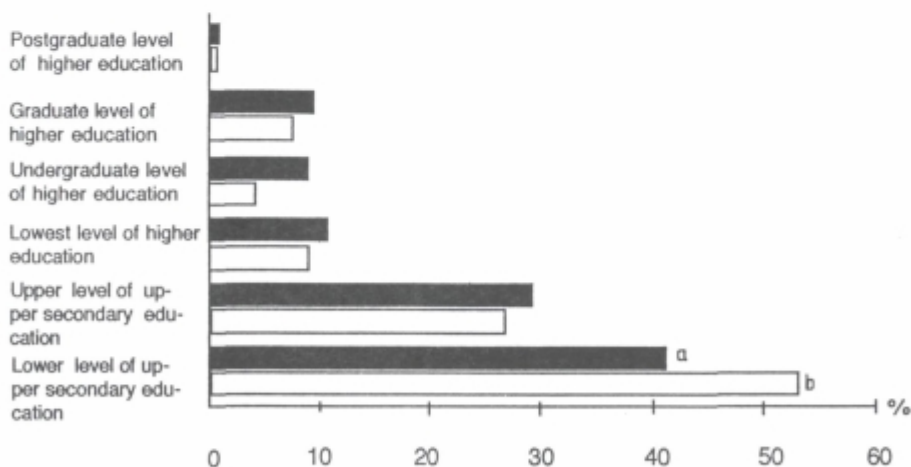


Figure 6: Swedish-speaking and total employed labour by education, 1985. (a) Swedish-speaking, (b) whole country.

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