

The role of Skolt Saami religious texts in language development and revitalization¹

Abstract

The subject of this article is the role of translations of religious literature into Skolt Saami in the development of the Skolt Saami written language and in the process of language revitalization. The Orthodox Church has had a strong influence on the life of Skolt Saami people, however, the interaction between language and religion and its significance is usually overlooked in the research context. Firstly, this article describes the historical development of the Skolt Saami language with a focus on the religious domain from the Christianization of the Skolt Saami up until the present, also giving an overview of the existing religious literature translated into Skolt Saami. Secondly, the article discusses the importance of these texts in the broader context of the development of the Skolt Saami language and the modern process of language revitalization, examining the significance of Skolt Saami religious literature in relation to language documentation, language standardization, language attitudes and language prestige. I will argue that the Skolt Saami religious texts have had a very crucial role in the development of the Skolt Saami written form and also in the process of language revitalization, a role exceeding the boundaries of religion. The article points out that these texts have ultimately positively influenced the vitality of the language and have strengthened its position both inside and outside of the Skolt Saami language community.

Illustrative Map

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saami-homeland-in-finland

Saami homeland in Finland² (University of Helsinki N.d.)

² *Saami homeland*, sometimes also translated as *Saami Domicile Area*, is a legal term in Finland and covers the municipalities of Enontekiö, Inari, Utsjoki and Sodankylä.

In many speech communities a Bible in their own speech marks the first written expression of their language or dialect. A translation or a retranslation of the Bible may set a new benchmark in the written form of the language concerned, as happened in the case of Luther's German translation of the Bible or the King James Version of the English Bible. (Muraoka 2001: 104)

1 Introduction

Language revitalization, or what Fishman (1991) calls *reversing language shift*, aims to increase the number of speakers of a particular language and extend the domains (e.g. family, education, employment, etc.) where it is employed (Grenoble & Whaley 2006). The written language often plays a crucial part in these efforts. However, discussions on language revitalization commonly overlook the domain of religion. Grenoble & Whaley (2006) aptly remark that ignoring religion is very ironic since religious ceremonies, sacred texts, and cultural activities imbued with spiritual value are often the last domains for a language that is disappearing.³ This domain could thus also provide hope for so called sleeping languages (cf. Leonard 2008).

Similarly, in the discussions on the Skolt Saami language revitalization, religion, namely the Orthodox Church, even though often mentioned as an important identity marker, has usually not been discussed in relation to the broader language revitalization efforts in the Skolt Saami community. The main goal of this article is thus to discuss the role of religion in the process of the Skolt Saami language revitalization, focusing on translations of religious texts into Skolt Saami and their role in the development and preservation of the language. To do so, I will first provide an overview of the existing

³ Hebrew revitalization, a well-known "success story" of language revitalization, is a good example confirming this statement.

translations of religious literature into Skolt Saami on the historical background. The article is structured as follows. First, I will present the sociocultural context of the Skolt Saami community followed by the theoretical and methodological framework informing this article. After that, I will describe the historical development of the Skolt Saami written language in the Russian Empire and in independent Finland. Finally, I will examine various effects of the Skolt Saami religious texts on the language.

2 “Minority within minority”

It is estimated that in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, there is a population of around 80,000 Saami people (Olsen 2020). Skolt Saami people are one of the Saami groups. Nowadays, they live in the territory of three different states – Finland, Norway, and Russia – and constitute approximately 1,000 people. Some even refer to Skolt Saami as “a minority within minority” based on various indicators (Lehtola 2004; Kosner 2016).

Firstly, Skolt Saami people make up a very small number of the total Saami population. Most of the Skolt Saami people live in Finland with an estimation of 600 people, of whom 400 are living in the traditional Skolt Saami area that includes the villages of Sevettijärvi (in Skolt Saami *Če'vetjäu'rr*), Nellim (*Njeä'llem*), and Keväjärvi (*Keväjäu'rr*) located in the north-eastern part of Finland (Siida N.d.).

Secondly, culturally, Skolt Saami have been strongly influenced by the East since the Middle Ages. This historical development has made Skolt Saami culture quite distinctive in comparison to other Saami cultures in Nordic countries. The differences are reflected, for example, in traditional dances, musical tradition, and garment style (Lehtola 2004).

Thirdly, religiously, Skolt Saami differ from the Western Saami groups. Whereas most of the Saami people belong to one of the Western Protestant churches, Skolt Saami people are usually Orthodox and belong to the Finnish Orthodox Church. Skolt Saami people were Christianized in the 16th century from the East. The

Orthodox Church has had an important role in the construction of the Skolt Saami identity, and it is also an ethnic marker in Finland compared to other Saami groups (Rantakeisu 2015). A wide array of authors such as Linkola (1996), Jefremoff (2005), Lehtola (2004), Sergejeva (2000), Leo (1995), and others *repeatedly* express the importance of the Finnish Orthodox Church in *everyday* life of Skolt Saami, emphasizing the Church as a supportive force for the Skolt Saami culture. Linkola & Linkola (2000) then state that the Skolt Saami language and the Orthodox Church are considered to be the symbols of the Skolt Saami identity.

Fourthly, linguistically, Skolt Saami language (in Skolt Saami *sää'mkiöll*) with its dialectal varieties⁴ belongs to the Eastern Saami language group. It is estimated that the language is spoken by approximately 300 people, and even smaller number of language users master Skolt Saami's written form (Kosner 2016). Language users in the older generations are often unable to read and write Skolt Saami because the orthography was not developed until the 1970s. On the other hand, language users from the younger generation who learnt the language at school have a higher competence in written language than oral language (Feist 2010). Jefremoff (2005) also shows that Skolt Saami is used mostly in informal settings, namely in families and among friends, to a much lesser degree in formal settings. UNESCO classifies the language as *severely endangered*.⁵ Due to the strong assimilation policies implemented by the Finnish government after the World War II, the intergenerational transmission of the language was severely weakened. Therefore, education is today one of the most important domains for the Skolt Saami language revitalization efforts. Nowadays, it is possible to learn Skolt Saami in language nests, in primary and secondary schools, and

⁴ It is recognized that Skolt Saami has four dialects, two belonging to the northern group and two to the southern group. The northern group consists of the Neiden (in Skolt Saami *Njauddâm*, in Finnish *Näätämö*) dialect, which is extinct or sleeping (cf. Leonard 2008), and the Paatsjoki (in Skolt Saami *Paaččjokk*) dialect. The southern group consists of Suonjel (in Skolt Saami *Suõ'nn'jel*, in Finnish *Suonikylä*) and Notozero-Girvasozero (in Skolt Saami *Njuõ'ttjäu'rr*) dialects (Sammallahti 1998).

⁵ UNESCO operates with four levels of language endangerment on the scale between "safe" and "extinct" – vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, and critically endangered (UNESCO N.d.).

also at the University of Oulu. In addition, Sámi Education Institute (in Skolt Saami *Sää'm škooultemkõõskõs*, in Finnish *Saamelaisalueen koulutuskeskus*) organizes Skolt Saami language courses for adults. Skolt Saami is also used in media, mostly in the production of the YLE Sápmi, a unit of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Rasmussen 2021).

3 Theoretical and methodological framework

The interaction between language and religion occurs on many various levels and can be explored from many different perspectives. There have been some attempts to frame the breadth of the study of language and religion, including the one presented in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion* (2001). However, for the purpose of my analysis, I draw on a framework developed by Bernard Spolsky that suggested the thematic structure for a volume entitled *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion* (2006) consisting of specific studies dealing with interactions between language and religion. This framework is summarized and described in Darquennes & Vandebussche (2011) as follows:

- 1) *Effects of religion on language*: Possible research topics include the influence of religion on language choice, language maintenance as well as (lexical) borrowing.
- 2) *The mutuality of language and religion*: Research within this dimension deals, for example, with the interplay between religions and languages in the changing sociolinguistic repertoire of multilingual towns. At stake here is the interaction between multilingualism and religious pluralism.
- 3) *Effects of language on religion*: A possible focus of study is the contribution of language (such as used in prayer, e.g.) to building a religious community.
- 4) *Language, religion and literacy*: Research within this dimension looks, for example, at the influence of language and religion on literacy (Darquennes & Vandebussche 2011: 4).

Even though Spolsky (2006: 7) himself admits that such “organization may be parsimonious” and “not terribly revealing, for it is no more than a grouping”, this framework might be a useful point of departure for further research in the field. In my analysis of translations of

religious literature into Skolt Saami in the context of the language's evolution I am going to focus on the effects of Orthodox Christianity on the Skolt Saami language. This comes under the first thematic group of the Spolsky's broad thematic grouping. As Darquennes & Vandenbussche (2011: 4) state, this might include diverse topics such as for example language choice, language maintenance, lexical borrowing and others. The theme is so broad that it allows for other research topics as well. Hence, perspectives on language documentation, language standardization and language attitudes will be integrated in the analysis.

The data used for the analysis were primarily collected in August 2015 in Sevettijärvi as a part of my Master's thesis project (Kosner 2016). I chose Sevettijärvi since it is considered to be a cultural center of Skolt Saami in Finland in which the vast majority of the population is Skolt Saami users. For my data collection, I used mainly qualitative semi-structured interviews and participatory observation. I interviewed five men and five women of age between 19 and 76 years using an interview guide covering different topics connected to language use in the Orthodox Church. All my informants have lived or worked in Sevettijärvi and identified themselves as Orthodox. The majority of them were Skolt Saami with different levels of Skolt Saami language proficiency. The interviews took place in Finnish.

The main arena for the method of participatory observation was the Pilgrimage of St. Tryphon, an annual tradition that takes place the last weekend in August (Leo 1995). This celebration has a very high attendance not only by Skolt Saami people or Orthodox people living in the Skolt Saami area but also by Orthodox believers coming from other parts of Finland and even from Russia or Norway. The pilgrimage usually takes place in Keväjärvi, Sevettijärvi, Nellim, and in Neiden on the Norwegian side. The data collected in 2015 gave insights into the language use in the Finnish Orthodox Church, especially in Sevettijärvi, including religious literature, religious services, religious education, and other types of communication in the domain of the Orthodox Church. Religious literature emerged as a topic of particular significance.

4 Development of the Skolt Saami language in the Russian Empire

Christianization of Skolt Saami people began in the 16th century. In order to prevent the spread of Lutheranism to the Kola Peninsula (in Skolt Saami *Kuâlõõgg njarggjânnam*), the Russian Orthodox Church, with the support of the Russian state, sent missionaries to convert Saami people. Among the first that brought Christianity to Saami people on the Kola Peninsula were preachers such as Tryphon, Feodorit, and Feognost (Sergejeva, 2000).

Saint Tryphon (1495-1583; in Skolt Saami *Pââ'ss Treeffan*), born Mitrophan, also called “Enlightener of the Saami” (Ortodoksi.net N.d.) was especially instrumental in spreading Christianity to the Kola Peninsula. He settled in Pechenga (in Skolt Saami *Peäccam*, in Finnish *Petsamo*), founded a monastery there, and preached the gospel to the local Saami population. Tryphon is of substantial importance to the Skolt Saami people. The legends that were written about him after his death are very much alive in the Skolt Saami community, and the legacy of St. Tryphon is honored as a significant part of Skolt Saami culture (Leo 1995).

Another significant figure for the spread of Christianity on the Kola Peninsula was Feodorit called “the Apostle of the Saami”. It is said that this missionary mastered the Saami language very well and that he developed the Saami written language, translated some prayers, and even wrote a Saami ABC book (Serck-Hanssen 2017; Magga 1974). This would have meant that Feodorit’s publications were the first translations into a Saami language ever. However, there is no evidence for these claims. Korpela (2010) writes: “Even if there were attempts to create a Saami literacy for the purpose of religious teaching, they were not successful and soon forgotten, and these attempts were not bound to Feodorit” (Korpela 2010: 218).

The region of Pechenga, the homeland of Skolt Saami, became a part of the Russian state in 1533 and remained so until 1920 (Feist 2010). As mentioned earlier, this century-long Russian influence is reflected in various parts of Skolt Saami culture, including the language. Skolt Saami has an extensive number of Russian loanwords, as do all Kola

Saami languages for which Russian was the principal contact language since the Middle Ages (Rießler 2009; Juutinen 2022). A large portion of loanwords in Skolt Saami have been adopted from Slavic languages, either directly or through Karelian⁶, and it is also found in the semantic field of religion and belief. Some examples are given in the table below. The majority of these words are included in Itkonen’s dictionary (1958).

Skolt Saami	Russian	English
ceerkav	церковь (tserkov')	church
Vuâsppå'd	Господь (Gospod')	God
ristt	крест (krest)	cross
risttâm	крещение (kreshenie)	baptism
rosttov	Рождество (Rozhdestvo)	Christmas
pričaas	причастие (prichastie)	eucharist
mo'lidva	молитва (molitva)	prayer
ukkõs	указ (ukaz)	sermon
blouslõs	благословение (blagoslovenie)	blessing
pro'sttjõs	прощение (proshenie)	forgiveness
prää'znik	праздник (prazdnik)	holiday
riizz	риза (riza)	vestment
sluu'žv	богослужения (bogosluzhenia)	church service

⁶ Itkonen (1942) argues that Saami people living on the Kola Peninsula got some basic information about Christianity through Karelians before Feodorit’s and Tryphon’s missions. Korhonen (1977) writes that Russian words for terms such as “Christmas”, “sin”, and “Mother of God” were not borrowed directly from Russian, but through Karelian.

veârr	bepa (vera)	faith, religion
reä'kk	rpex (grekh)	sin

Table 1: Examples of loanwords of Slavic origin adopted by Skolt Saami in the semantic field of religion and belief.

Among the first researchers that came to the Kola Peninsula was Anders Johan Sjögren in the 1820s (Itkonen 1958). Based on his research trip, in 1828 Sjögren published a book entitled *Anteckningar om församlingarne i Kemi-Lappmark* (in English *Notes on the parishes in Kemi Lapland*). This book contains the translation of the Lord's Prayer in two of Skolt Saami dialects – the one spoken in the area of Notozero, and another dialect spoken in the areas of Muotka (in Skolt Saami *Mue'tkk*) and Paatsjoki (Sjögren 1828). These samples might be considered as the first documented texts written in Skolt Saami. In the upcoming decades, researchers such as J. A. Friis and Arvid Genetz collected some samples of the Skolt Saami language in different dialects in the form of fairy tales and *leu'dds*⁷ (Juutinen 2017). Itkonen (1958) mentions D. E. D. Europaeus and his handwritten, non-published collection of texts from 1856. Europaeus wrote down the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son in Notozero dialect and the Lord's Prayer, again in the Notozero dialect, however with some differences in comparison to Sjögren's version (Markus Juutinen, personal communication, November 2, 2018). All of these language samples were collected for academic purposes (Juutinen 2017). In 1894⁸, a priest called Konstantin Shchekoldin (1845–1916) translated the Gospel of Matthew into Skolt Saami. In 1867,

⁷A *leu'dd* is a vocally performed individual song, a singing tradition used to describe and comment on both the history and present of Skolt Saami life (Jouste 2017).

⁸ There is some confusion in the literature regarding the year when Shchekoldin's translation was published. The literature mentions at least three different years of publication. Sometimes, the year of 1878 is presented (Moshnikoff 2009), however this was not Shchekoldin's translation and the translation was not Skolt Saami. This translation was made by Genetz into Kildin and Akkala Saami, which was difficult for the Skolts to understand (Juutinen 2017; Kulonen, Seurujärvi-Kari, & Pulkkinen). The year of 1884 is also mentioned in the literature (Sergejeva 2000; Kosner 2016; Kotcheva &

Shchekoldin graduated from the seminary in Archangelsk and the following year he moved to Paatsjoki where he served as a priest in the local parish until his death. This was at the time the Skolt Saami area was part of the Russian Empire and the parish was under the administration of the Russian Orthodox Church. Soon after he moved to Paatsjoki, Shchekoldin began to learn Skolt Saami and later on he was considered to be a specialist in the Skolt Saami language. His wife, Marija Kozmonovna, who spoke Skolt Saami and was apparently a local Skolt Saami, helped him in his efforts (Juutinen 2017). Shchekoldin collected local legends that were published in 1880 (Kulonen, Seurujärvi-Kari, & Pulkkinen, 2005) and in 1894 he published his translation of the Gospel of Matthew, written in the Cyrillic alphabet and based on Paatsjoki dialect. A year later, in 1895, he also published a Skolt Saami ABC primer containing 22 pages, including the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in Skolt Saami (Juutinen, 2017).

According to Juutinen's analysis (2017), Shchekoldin's translation is full of errors resulting from his insufficient knowledge of the language. Nevertheless, his ABC primer and the translation of the Gospel of Matthew are considered to be the first, and for a long time also the last systematic attempt to create a written Skolt Saami language.

Shchekoldin did not have any successors of his work. As Juutinen (2017) notes, there might be different reasons for this development. Shchekoldin died during World War I when the situation in Northern Russia was chaotic. Finland became independent and the majority of Skolt Saami became Finnish citizens. During the 1930s, orthographies were created for many minority languages in the Soviet Union, among others Kildin Saami, but not for Skolt Saami because a part of them was still living in the Soviet Union. Juutinen argues that there might be political reasons for this. Firstly, Skolt Saami had less speakers in the Soviet Union than Kildin Saami, and secondly, Skolt Saami had the most speakers in Finland - a state promoting a very different political ideology compared to the Soviet Union.

Rießler 2016). This date probably stems from Itkonen (1958). However, the correct date is 1894 as it is written on the book itself (Shchekoldin 1894).

5 Development of the Skolt Saami language in independent Finland

Until 1920, the Pechenga region, a part of the Skolt Saami homeland⁹, belonged to the Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union. As a part of the Tartu Peace Treaty in 1920, the Soviet Union ceded this area to Finland, and consequently, the connections between Skolt Saami families on the Finnish border and those on the Soviet border were cut off. In addition, it also split the Suonjel area, with one quarter remaining on the Soviet side (Lehtola 2004). This development had significance in terms of citizenship, family connections, and sociocultural and linguistic change. Russian was no longer needed. Rather, Finnish was required (Feist 2010).

A new social and political climate also required changes in the Finnish Orthodox Church. The church was a part of the Russian Orthodox Church until 1923 when the Finnish Orthodox Church affiliated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and this canonical allegiance no longer belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate. The Finnish Orthodox Church began to nationalize the church in order to prove its loyalty to the newly formed Finnish state. Nationalizing the church also had its implications regarding language use. For many parishes, this was a period of transition from the Church Slavonic liturgical services to the Finnish ones (Takala-Roszczenko 2017). This was also the case in the Skolt Saami area. At the beginning of the Finnish independence, Church Slavonic and Finnish were used side by side. Gradually, the liturgies were given almost exclusively in Finnish (Leo 1995).

Skolt lives were drastically changed due to the historical events of World War II. When the Winter War burst out between Finland and the Soviet Union in November 1939, Skolt Saami had to be evacuated. Even though they could return to their homes by the spring of 1940, in 1944 at the end of the Continuation War, they had to be evacuated again, and this time they had to leave their homes forever. After the war, Finland ceded the Pechenga region to the Soviet Union (Linkola

⁹The Skolt Saami traditional living area was located between the Neiden and Pechenga areas in the Tuloma area (Linkola 1996).

1996). Skolt Saami who had formerly lived in Pechenga found a new home in Nellim, and those originally from Paatsjoki moved to Keväjärvi, while Skolts from Suonjel moved to Sevettijärvi-Näätämo area (Lehtola 2004).

After the relocation to the new areas, the connections to the traditional homeland were lost, as was the traditional way of living. In addition, the Finnish government implemented assimilation policies in order to incorporate Skolt Saami into the Finnish society, resulting in many traumas (Rantakeisu 2015). One of the main instruments of these policies was education. Children did not have the opportunity to learn Skolt Saami language up until the 1970s and in addition, the language was forbidden at school. Skolt Saami pupils were bullied and as a result, they often hid their own identity in order to cope with the situation (Lehtola 2004). The fact that Skolt Saami language was excluded from the public sphere negatively influenced the attitudes towards the language even among Skolts themselves.

In 1929, Yrjö Räme (1900-1990) came to Pechenga – at the time belonging to Finland - and started working as a priest in the local parish, which consisted especially of Skolt Saami people. Father Yrjö¹⁰ continued his work among Skolt Saami people even in the times of war, evacuation, and even after the relocation of Skolt Saami to a new land. He served as a priest in the newly established Orthodox Parish of Lapland (in Finnish *Lapin ortodoksinen seurakunta*) from 1950 until his retirement in 1971. Fr. Yrjö was very popular among parishioners in the places he served, and his popularity is reflected in a book by Mirjam Kälkäjä published in 2002 entitled *Isä Yrjö, Petsamon ja Lapin Pappi* (*Father Yrjö, priest of Petsamo and Lapland*).

Fr. Yrjö could speak Finnish and Russian and, as mentioned in the book, was also able to understand Skolt Saami. He was well acquainted with Skolt Saami life, and related to the Skolt Saami people, culture, and traditions respectfully (Kälkäjä 2002), even when Skolt Saami language was a forbidden language in schools and was excluded from public life during the times of strong assimilation policy after the relocation to Sevettijärvi. His support of the Skolt Saami language, which is also remembered by one of my informants

¹⁰ Hereinafter referred to as “Fr. Yrjö”

(See Kosner 2016: 53), stood in sharp contrast to the attitudes and policies of the Finnish society at that time. Nonetheless, even though he related positively to the Skolt Saami language maintenance in general, he was not in favor of the Skolt Saami language becoming a liturgical language.

The Skolt Saami culture and language have begun to revive little by little from the 1970s and 1980s onward. In the 1970s, a Skolt Saami orthography using the Latin alphabet was created and, in 1972, the first ABC primer with the new orthography enabled language education at school in Sevettijärvi (Saa'mi Nue'tt N.d.). The Finnish Orthodox Church responded swiftly to the sociocultural changes and revitalization movement.

In 1981, the General Assembly of the Orthodox Church of Finland instructed Metropolitan Leo, who now serves as the Archbishop of the Finnish Orthodox Church, to take initiative in launching a prayer book in Skolt Saami that was also to be used during liturgies by the choir (Rantakeisu 2015). This work was finished in 1983, exactly 400 years after St. Tryphon's death, and became one of the first books published in Skolt Saami and the first Skolt Saami book intended for adult readers. It is a prayer book which is in Skolt Saami entitled *Risttoummi mo'lidvaķe'rjj* (in English *Orthodox prayer book*). In 1988, the Gospel of John (in Skolt Saami *Evvan evanķe'lium*) was translated into Skolt Saami, and in 2022 the translation was revised according to contemporary orthography and published online on the website raamattu.fi (Suomen piipiasseura N.d.). Nowadays, there is also ongoing work on the translation of the Gospel of Luke (Kosner 2016). The goal is to translate all four gospels into Skolt Saami. This project is coordinated by the Finnish Bible Society. Another important religious text that was translated into Skolt Saami was Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (in Skolt Saami *Pââ'ss E'ččen Evvan Krysostomoozz liturgia*) which was published in 2002. Religious literature in Skolt Saami has been also produced in cooperation with other churches. In 2014, the first ecumenical and religious book was published in all three Saami languages used in Finland - Northern, Inari, and Skolt Saami. The book is in Skolt Saami entitled *Säälđat ekumeenlaž mo'lidva- da psalmmķee'rjj* (in English *Ecumenical prayer and hymn book for soldiers*). The book is distributed in the military and contains 30 hymns and prayers in Skolt Saami (Parviainen 2014).

However, religious texts were translated into Skolt Saami using the Latin alphabet even before 1983 and outside of the official Orthodox structures. In 1978, Matti Sverloff translated religious texts into Skolt Saami in the form of a book written on a typewriter. The collection is entitled *Ortodoksa sluusbakjirj* (in English *Orthodox Service Book*). Other religious texts appeared in *Sää'modđâz* (in English *Skolt Saami News*), the only Skolt Saami newspaper in history that was published between the years 1978 and 1986 (Moshnikoff & Moshnikoff N.d.), financially supported among others also by the Orthodox Publishing Council (in Finnish *Ortodoksisen kirjallisuuden julkaisuneuvosto*). In different issues of the *Sää'modđâz*¹¹, we can find Skolt Saami religious texts, such as songs, prayers, liturgical texts, and the Nativity story.

Nowadays, Skolt Saami religious texts also occasionally appear in the bulletin of the Orthodox Church named *Paimen-Sanommat*. It has been in print since 1981 and its aim is to inform members of the Orthodox Church in the Diocese of Oulu about the spiritual life and activities in the local parishes. For example, in May 2013, a foreword that was a small sermon *Kiitoksen aika* (in English *Time of Gratitude*) was written in Finnish by Metropolitan Panteleimon and was also translated into Skolt Saami (Panteleimon 2013).

It is also worth mentioning other literature in Skolt Saami that promotes Skolt Saami Orthodox traditions. These texts are used especially for educational purposes primarily targeting youth. In 2004 and 2006 two children's books were published telling Skolt Saami legends about St. Tryphon - *Pâ'ss Treeffan da kue'b33* (in English *Saint Tryphon and the Bear*) and *Pâ'ss Treeffan Peäccmest* (in English *Saint Tryphon of Pechenga*) (Sámediggi N.d.). Additionally, in 1999, *Ortodokslažvuõđ mâi'd, mōõzz, mä'htt - ceerkavteâđ kêârjjaž* (in English *What, why and how in Orthodoxy – a church handbook*) came out. This richly illustrated book contains the basics of Orthodoxy and is also meant to be a supportive teaching material for the religious classes at school. The latest religious education teaching materials translated into Skolt Saami were published in 2017, a textbook and a

¹¹ Issues no. 6 from 1979, no. 7 from 1980, no. 9 from 1980, no. 10 from 1980, no. 12 from 1981, no. 13 from 1981, no. 17 from 1982, no. 20 from 1983 and no. 25 from 1985.

workbook named *Muu ceerkav* (in English *My church*) intended as teaching materials for the fifth grade of primary schools.

6 Translation of religious texts and their role in the creation and development of written Skolt Saami

The opening vignette of this article quoting Muraoka (2001: 104) points towards the processes of language documentation and language standardization. It shows that religious texts, particularly the Bible, the most translated book in human history,¹² have often held a central position in these processes. In many cases, these texts mark the first or even the only written expression in certain languages or dialects.

Language documentation is briefly defined by Himmelmann (2006: 1) as “a lasting, multipurpose record of a language”. That includes descriptions of grammar, sound systems, conversational norms, and socio-cultural genres such as stories, songs, religious texts, etc. (Davis 2015). Firstly, language documentation is crucial when a language is in danger of disappearing. A thorough documentation of an endangered language supports language maintenance and enables a potential language revitalization. As Davis (2015) remarks, religious texts play often a critical role in endangered language revitalization. Secondly, even if a certain language is not severely endangered, language documentation strengthens the empirical foundation researchers from different fields of inquiry can utilize (Himmelmann 2006) and it also widens the possibilities of the language community for the use of the written language.

Translations of religious texts into Skolt Saami hold several primacies. Sjögren’s translation of the Lord’s Prayer into two Skolt Saami dialects which was published in 1828 might be considered as the first known Skolt Saami text in history. Shchekoldin’s translation of the Gospel of Matthew from 1894 marked another significant milestone in

¹² According to Matthias Gerner (2018) by 2013 the Bible (either complete or portions of the text) has been translated into 2,850 languages and the number is still growing.

the history of the Skolt Saami language, as it is the first Skolt Saami book. And finally, the Skolt Saami prayer book published in 1983, using the contemporary Skolt Saami orthography, is the first Skolt Saami book intended for adult readers. The texts from the 19th century, including Europaeus' texts, laid the foundation in the process of language documentation of Skolt Saami, and also set the groundwork for the recognition of the Skolt Saami dialects and their labeling. More recent Skolt Saami religious texts have contributed in recording the Skolt Saami use of the modern Skolt Saami orthography, enlarging the Skolt Saami text corpus.

While the bigger European languages passed the initial stages of standardization long ago, there are many languages around the world, including Skolt Saami, that still face challenges related to the process of language standardization (Darquennes & Vandenbussche, 2011). Charles Ferguson (1996) describes language standardization as an establishment of linguistic rules in a language community (see also Costa, De Korne, & Lane, 2018). He writes that it is:

the process of one variety of a language becoming widely accepted throughout the speech community as a supradialectal norm—the “best” form of the language—rated above regional and social dialects, although these may be felt to be appropriate in some domains (Ferguson 1996: 189).

The first attempt to create a Skolt Saami orthography is directly connected to Shchekoldin's translation of the Gospel of Matthew. However, Shchekoldin did not succeed in establishing his proposed orthography. It took more than seven decades until the contemporary Skolt Saami orthography was created in the 1970s. The Skolt Saami prayer book published in 1983 was one of the first books published in Skolt Saami, helping in the process of establishing Skolt Saami as a written language not long after the modern Skolt Saami orthography was made. One of my informants talked about its importance for the development of the Skolt Saami language as follows:

Even if one is not interested in the church stuff, I would recommend studying these texts, because everything is in place here. These church texts are the kind of texts from which you can learn a lot of the Skolt Saami language, a lot of the Skolt Saami grammar and... Also morphological derivations and everything possible you can find here.

These works are really valuable, even though this one [the prayer book] is small (See Kosner 2016: 66).

Indeed, the prayer book and other religious texts rendered in Skolt Saami, though published for religious purposes, are precious texts of which significance exceeds the boundaries of the religious domain. Their value is also purely linguistic and educational. These texts have contributed to the standardization of written Skolt Saami, a role that many other religious texts played for different languages in the past. In addition, this work is one of the cornerstones of the Skolt Saami literature.

No doubt that any publication in a minority language enriches the language and strengthens its position. This is oftentimes even more true for religious texts. In indigenous communities, creation of dictionaries is usually of the highest priority followed by educational materials and then religious texts, especially in the communities that greatly value their religious heritage (Mosel 2006). However, the translation process itself is significant for the vitality of the language (Harrison 2015). The translation project of the prayer book and other religious texts into Skolt Saami engaged members of the community who had a profound knowledge of their language in solving various problems concerning the complexity of their own language, including the necessity of developing new lexical items. The term “proclamations” (in Finnish *kuulutukset*, in Skolt Saami *kuultõõzz*) used also in the Orthodox wedding tradition can be given as an example (Erkki Lumisalmi, personal communication, December 11, 2018). The term is formed, as it is in Finnish (M. Juutinen, personal communication, December 11, 2018), from the verb *kuulted* (in Finnish

kuuluttaa, in English *proclaim*) which is derived from the verb *kuullâd* (in Finnish *kuulla*, in English *hear*).

Both orthography development and language standardization are political processes depending on the given socio-political context. Grenoble & Whaley (2006) write:

The importance of sociological factors cannot be overstated. Regardless of how linguistically and technically sound an orthography might be, its initial (and continued) acceptance by the people for whom it is designed is critical in determining its eventual effectiveness and use (Grenoble & Whaley 2006: 137).

Shchekoldin used the Cyrillic writing system as that was the writing system for Russian, the principal language of the Russian Empire. Nowadays, Kildin Saami, a minority language used in Russia closely related to Skolt Saami, also uses Cyrillic. In the 1970s, the socio-political context was of course very different from Shchekoldin's time and so were the choices regarding the form of Skolt Saami's written language. The processes of orthography development and language standardization seek and need acceptance first and foremost from the language community itself, but also from national authorities. Without language standardization, writing in a particular language cannot be used by a large number of language users. Therefore, such an absence decreases chances for a successful language revitalization aiming towards enlargement of number of speakers and language domains (Grenoble & Whaley 2006).

Since language standardization is a political process, publications of texts in modern Skolt Saami might also have political implications, especially when it comes to publishing potentially authoritative texts such as the prayer book, Bible texts, and liturgical texts. A possible negative side effect of these publications might be a weakened status of other dialects. Since the modern Skolt Saami orthography is based on Suonjel dialect, it can be also stated that texts published in the modern Skolt Saami weaken the position of other Skolt Saami dialects that are still in use – Paatsjoki and Notozero-Girvasozero.

Beerle-Moore & Voinov (2015) state that there are generally two ways Bible translations can contribute to an increase of language vitality. The first one has to do with the physical book and standardization of language as already discussed. The second effect, as they state, “stems not from the effects of the published book, but rather from ancillary activities that tend to be conducted within the recipient language community by the translation team in parallel to their [Bible translation] work” (Beerle-Moore & Voinov 2015: 5). That includes, for example, linguistic description of the recipient language, programs developing vernacular literacy, radio broadcasting in the minority language, and other language-in-use and cultural activities.

Features of this second effect can already be traced in Shchekoldin’s attempts. Not only did he translate the Gospel of Matthew into Skolt Saami, he simultaneously tried to develop Skolt Saami literacy by establishing church schools that became the first ones for Saami people on the Kola peninsula, providing elementary education for many local children. Until that time, formal education was given only in Russian. For educational purposes, the Skolt Saami ABC primer was published in 1895, becoming the first teaching material intended for Saami people living in Russia (Kulonen, Seurujärvi-Kari, & Pulkkinen 2005).

More recently, another side effect of the translations of religious text can be seen in programs broadcasted on Radio YLE Sápmi. The channel has contributed a great deal in preserving and revitalizing Skolt Saami language and one of the programs is also of a religious nature. This spiritual program in Skolt Saami has been hosted by Erkki Lumisalmi for many years. On average it has been broadcasted five or six times a year and uses religious literature translated into Skolt Saami (Kosner 2016). Religious texts are not necessary for the broadcasting of the radio program or realizing cultural programs actively supported by the Orthodox Church, however, the existence of these texts enables the spread of the language into different domains reaching larger numbers of active or potential language users. Nevertheless, at least one particular religious sub-domain is directly dependent on the translations of the religious text into Skolt Saami, so that the language can be used there. It is the sub-domain of the Orthodox services.

7 Prerequisites for the use of Skolt Saami at the Orthodox services

I would argue there are two main prerequisites for the use of Skolt Saami at Orthodox services. The first one relates to the views of the Orthodox Church towards translating sacred texts into vernaculars and the second one relates to the nature of Orthodox services in general.

Ferguson (1982: 103) discusses different attitudes of religions towards translations of sacred texts and assumes that “all religious belief systems include some beliefs about language”. There are two main attitudes towards translation of religious texts: “those for which there exists one unique, sacred language and those for which the message of sacred texts can be expressed with equal validity in all tongues” (Delisle & Woodworth 2012: 153). If, for example, there is a belief that a language in which a given religious text was written is sacred, such a notion influences decisions about translation negatively. In history, such views are known from examples of the relationships between Latin and the Roman Catholic Church, Arabic in Islam, or Hebrew and Judaism (Sawyer 2001). Eastern Christianity on the other hand did not insist on linguistic uniformity from early on. The Orthodox tradition kept more of a comprehensibility approach that values translation of religious texts giving primacy to comprehension and sees languages in which religious texts are written as vehicles for communication of religious ideas rather than as sacred artefacts in their own (Liddicoat 2012).

These principles are reflected also in the Skolt Saami context. Fr. Yrjö related positively to the Skolt Saami language maintenance in general, even during the times of the hard assimilation policies from the majority Finnish society towards the Skolt Saami minority. However, he was not in favor of the Skolt Saami language gaining ground in the religious domain and becoming a liturgical language.

For years, there was a discussion in Pechenga about the translation of liturgical texts into Skolt Saami language. However, Fr. Yrjö, as Kälkäjä (2002) describes it, urged caution in these efforts:

In his opinion, youth understood better Finnish under actual circumstances. Skolt Saami liturgical texts were not necessarily the best solution for the old generation.

Traditional prayer language always was Church Slavonic, by no means Skolt Saami language (Kälkäjä 2002: 69, my translation from Finnish).

I would argue that Fr. Yrjö's negative attitude towards Skolt Saami language becoming a liturgical language stemmed particularly from two main causes. The first one is the matter of tradition. Skolt Saami language was not a liturgical language, and Church Slavonic, especially at that time, had a strong position in the church. The second cause is a practical one - comprehensibility. Fr. Yrjö was afraid that people would not understand as much Skolt Saami as they understood Finnish or Church Slavonic. At that time people spoke or understood Russian and were used to hearing Church Slavonic in the church domain, whereas Skolt Saami lacked specific church terminology, meaning that new lexical items needed to be developed in order to express religious ideas in the Skolt Saami language. As mentioned earlier, in the early years of the Finnish independence, Church Slavonic and Finnish were used side by side, but gradually, the liturgies were performed almost entirely in Finnish. As Leo (1995) writes, older generations of Skolt Saami at that time did not always understand Finnish perfectly, even though they spoke the language with the Finnish-speaking people.

The situation began to change from the 1970s with the Skolt Saami revitalization activities, and the Finnish Orthodox Church responded to these sociocultural changes by translating some religious texts into Skolt Saami in the 1980s. According to one of the theoretical principles for sociology of language and religion proposed by Fishman (2006) in his decalogue, all sources of sociocultural change are also sources of change in the sociolinguistic repertoire vis-à-vis religion. I would argue that the change that occurred in the Skolt Saami society was also a source for a change in the domain of the Orthodox Church that recognized the needs of the Skolt Saami language and culture for support.

Another prerequisite for the use of Skolt Saami at the Orthodox services is the nature of Orthodox services. Liturgy is a very important part of the Orthodox church tradition. As Grande (2009) states, it is the most important element among Orthodox believers. Orthodox liturgy, in which people assemble to worship and pray in a joined body, has a long tradition. There are several types of liturgies used nowadays within Eastern Christianity. Countries converted to Christianity from Constantinople use Byzantine rites. Liturgies within this rite were fixed by canon law in the 6th century and have further developed since that time. They persisted into the present with only a few minor changes. The most celebrated liturgy within the Byzantine Rite is the one of Saint John Chrysostom, originating from the 5th century AD (Fortescue 1908). Orthodox liturgies are almost entirely sung, including reading from the Scriptures. Music is thus an integral part of liturgies. The exception is homily, which means the commentary on the preceding reading from the Scriptures.

The fact that the format of Orthodox liturgy is fixed means translation of liturgical texts is a prerequisite for a certain language to be used as a liturgical language. The use of the Skolt Saami language in the church is thus closely connected with translations of religious books into Skolt Saami. As stated earlier, it was in the beginning of the 1980s when Metropolitan Leo initiated the launching of the prayer book in Skolt Saami which was published in 1983. The very same year Erkki Lumisalmi started to work as a traveling cantor in the Orthodox Parish of Lapland. These two factors meant the beginning of Skolt Saami usage in the Orthodox Parish of Lapland (in Skolt Saami *Lappi ortodookslaš sie'brrkå'dd*)¹³. Through the prayer book and Erkki Lumisalmi, Skolt Saami crept into liturgies in the Orthodox Parish of

¹³ Since 1. 1. 2022 the parish is called Orthodox Chapel Parish of Lapland (in Finnish *Lapin ortodoksinen kappeliseurakunta*, in Skolt Saami *Lappi ortodookslaš ceessansie'brrkå'dd*) which is a part of the Orthodox Parish of North Finland (Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko 2021). The main church in the chapel parish is located in Rovaniemi, and in the municipality of Inari, there are three other churches where services are held: in Ivalo, in Nellim, and in Sevettijärvi. Moreover, there is also a chapel in Kevärjärvi. A priest travels around the vast parish area to hold services, which means that for example in Sevettijärvi the services are usually held on a monthly basis (Kosner 2016).

Lapland, thus creating a new arena for use of the Skolt Saami language.

In 2002, the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom was published in the Skolt Saami language. This enables the Skolt Saami language to be used by the priest performing fixed liturgical acts. Therefore, Skolt Saami can be heard not only from the cantor, the choir, and the members of the parish, but also from the priest. That enables the priest to use Skolt Saami to quite a large extent, even though his knowledge of Skolt Saami language might not be so extensive. Also, the Skolt Saami translation of the Gospel of John makes it possible for it to be used whenever a reading from this gospel is to be read during liturgy according to the liturgical year and its cycle of reading. Moreover, this translation can be used also for religious services in other churches, for example in the Evangelical Lutheran Church which has had an increasing number of Skolt Saami members (Rantakeisu 2021). The only part of the Orthodox liturgy that does not depend on translations of liturgical texts is homily.

Orthodox services do not only include liturgies, but also other services that are of religious, civil, and cultural importance for Skolt Saami lives, such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and house blessings. At these services, Skolt Saami is nowadays used to some extent. Individuals, couples, and families can ask for Skolt Saami to be used, but the use depends first and foremost on the existence of translations of texts that are necessary for performing particular acts. The more translations of these texts, the more often Skolt Saami can be used on these occasions. Availability of the Skolt Saami translations of such texts that are used for Orthodox services and rituals together with priests' at least basic knowledge of Skolt Saami are essential to widen the field of possibilities for the use of the language within the religious domain.

8 Translation of religious texts as a powerful instrument in strengthening ethnolinguistic vitality

Translations of religious texts into Skolt Saami do not only have a functional value, but also a symbolic one. Grenoble & Whaley write:

Having a written form of a language can elevate perceptions of its prestige. Alternatively, lack of a written form is often interpreted by local communities as signaling that their language is not a “real” language, that it does not merit writing (Grenoble & Whaley 2006: 116, 117).

Language attitudes and language prestige play a critical role in language survival. They are two of the factors that might decide if a language is going to be abandoned by the language users or not. This is true at both the national and the local levels (Grenoble & Whaley 2006). The close link between language standardization processes and the forming of language hierarchies in the West is well-known. The Western “superiority” over “the Other” is also based on the language aspect (Donaldson 2018).

Translation work and different activities that are related to or that result from translation work tend to positively influence the opinions of both native speakers and outsiders about the minority language (Beerle-Moore & Voinov 2015). It is of utmost importance for the community that has suffered from the negative attitudes from the majority society that they gradually pass on to the language community itself in order to create a positive image of their own language of which they can be proud.

The history of the written Skolt Saami language shows that the translations of religious texts into this minority language have largely contributed not only to the creation and development of the written language itself, but also to its prestige. Before the 1980s, translations of religious texts publicly used at liturgies were available for Skolt Saami people only in the majority Finnish language or in the traditional Church Slavonic. Publication of these texts in Skolt Saami has upgraded the status of the minority language. As shown earlier, the existence of the prayer book, Gospel of John and liturgical texts have a high functional value as they are a basic prerequisite for Skolt Saami being used at Orthodox services. It is primarily through these texts the language was able to enter into Orthodox services as a liturgical language and can thus be heard in churches. The most recent publication of the revised translation of the Gospel of John is

according to Veikko Feodoroff, the current Skolt Saami representative (in Skolt Saami *ouddooumaž*, in Finnish *luottamusmies*), also very significant for the Skolt Saami community. He says that the translation will increase the use of Skolt Saami and also improves the position of the language among other language groups (Huovari 2022).

According to my informants, Skolt Saami is always heard in the church, which they perceive very positively. They are proud to hear their own language in the church because, as a public place, its use makes Skolt Saami more visible not only for Skolt Saami people, but also for Finnish people and possibly even for visitors from other countries.

Nowadays it feels already really natural, for example, that liturgies are conducted at least partly in Skolt Saami. And I remember that earlier the church songs were in Skolt Saami conducted by the cantor, they were used and learned and also the parish takes part in the liturgies and sings those songs. But then little by little we started to hear [Skolt Saami] also in the priestly acts, there the language started to appear and that surely got attention because, they [priests] used officially our own language (See Kosner 2016: 45).

The use of Skolt Saami religious texts in the church raises visibility and awareness of the Skolt Saami language and also strengthens the status of the Skolt Saami language and Skolt Saami identity. This is true for Skolt Saami people living in the traditional Skolt Saami area, but also for those who live outside of this area. Since 2003, Skolt Saami liturgies are held in Helsinki too. Liturgies in Skolt Saami in the capital of Finland which is located more than a thousand kilometers away from the Skolt Saami area is an important event for local urban Skolts strengthening their Skolt Saami identity (Kallio 2017). Skolts living outside of the Skolt Saami homeland are too able to listen to the earlier mentioned religious program on YLE Sápmi.

Religious literature is also used at schools for educational purposes, at home for religious purposes - including personal prayers - and for the enrichment of their Skolt Saami language skills. As shown in the variety of environments in which Skolt Saami religious texts are used, Skolt Saami religious literature has widened possibilities for the use of the language in different language arenas, not only in the religious sphere, but also in the profane domains. In some cases, it has even created new language arenas, such as Orthodox services.

The role of translation of religious literature into Skolt Saami and the role of Orthodoxy in the language revitalization process in general, also due to the special relationship between the Orthodox Church and Skolt Saami people, has been quite remarkable. One of my informants described the role of the Orthodox Church in the process of the Skolt Saami language revitalization as follows.

I say that it is very significant. My personal opinion is that it is the most significant. Well, of course, the teaching materials are made and if you think what things the school and its teachers have made, plus what the church has made possible, that all these are translated into Skolt Saami, that is really remarkable achievement in my opinion. I consider it as one of the most significant among these language revitalization issues. Well, when these [books] were made, nobody talked about language revitalization at that time, not by this term. That term came later on. But in my opinion the attempts started earlier, thus when Skolt Saami was being made a written language, when Skolt Saami was becoming a written language, the Church joined the process really quickly (See Kosner 2016: 65).

This quote illustrates that religion can play an important role in language maintenance on different levels, especially in the

communities that see the church as an integral part of their cultural heritage (Woods 2004) as is the case for Skolt Saami.

Minority language use at religious services and on other occasions is a language maintenance factor (Hyltenstam & Stroud 1991). This is very significant from the point of language vitality. When a language is used in fewer domains it signifies lessening the vitality of the language. On the other hand, if a language is used in a higher number of domains, it is a sign of strengthening language vitality (Grenoble & Whaley 2006). Also, increased use of a minority language or a non-dominant language within a single domain is a contribution towards the efforts of revitalizing the language. In addition, it has a symbolic value, and such use strengthens the minority language and its chances for survival. However, as implied earlier, religion as a domain of language use (oftentimes through the medium of religious texts) in this context also intersects with the domains of media, education, family, friends, etc. To draw strict boundaries between single domains is thus impossible. The fact that the domain of religion does not belong only to the church, but to other areas of social life and language use as well, makes the role of religion in the revitalization process even more important. Translation of religious texts into Skolt Saami has given the language better prospects for its revitalization efforts and many Skolt Saami express their wish that more religious texts should be translated into Skolt Saami and hope that one day the whole Bible will be translated into their language (Kosner 2016; Huovari 2022).

9 Conclusion

In this article, I have looked more closely at the effects of the Finnish Orthodox Church on the development and revitalization of the Skolt Saami language. I focused especially on the role of religious texts in relation to the various topics of effects of religion on language including language documentation, language standardization, language attitudes, language prestige and language revitalization. In this article, I argue that the translations of religious texts into Skolt Saami have had a crucial role in the development and revitalization of the Skolt Saami language. This can be stated based on four different

aspects of the Skolt Saami religious texts regarding their significance for the language. 1) The very first known Skolt Saami texts marking the beginning of documentation of the language are of religious nature. 2) Religious texts that are of high religious and cultural importance for the local community, in other words authoritative texts, are significant for their linguistic value, contributing to the process of language standardization. 3) Due to the nature of the Orthodox services, Skolt Saami religious texts are a basic prerequisite for the language being used at the services, thus creating new arenas where the language can be used. 4) By developing the Skolt Saami written language as well as creating new public spheres for the oral language, religious literature has upgraded the status and the prestige of the language both internally and externally. Ultimately, all these factors have strengthened the position of the Skolt Saami language and its vitality.

In the case of the Skolt Saami language, I have demonstrated that the domain of religion, even though oftentimes wrongfully overlooked, can play a very vital role in the development of a minority language that exceeds the boundaries of religion itself. This is true especially for the communities that see religion as an integral part of their cultural heritage. Careful examination of religious texts and religion in general in connection with the processes of language maintenance and language revitalization might also give benefits to other indigenous groups and language minorities around the world.

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