Frozen in time? Social Actors and Minority Language Standardisation

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This paper addresses the role of users in the standardisation of Kven, a Finnic minority language spoken in Northern Norway. Influenced by the global focus on language revitalisation and the new status of Sámi and minority languages in neighbouring countries, many Kven wish to reclaim their language, and currently, a written standard is being developed. The first version of the standard is due to be completed in 2014.

Developing a standard for a minority language is not a neutral process; this has consequences for the status of the language and how the language users relate to the new standard. An inherent problem with standardisation is whether the users themselves will accept and identify with the standard chosen. Standardisation changes the conditions and scope for human agency, and therefore, social actors are key factors when standardising minority languages. I will use an ethnographic approach to address how minority language users relate to standardisation processes (Lane 2011), focussing on the role of social actors (Scollon and Scollon 2004). For this presentation, I will draw on data from sociolinguistic interviews with Kven speakers and participant observation as a member of the Kven Language Council.

Language standardisation usually has a material outcome such as texts resulting from the standardisation process (text books, grammars and dictionaries), and also linguistic forms included in in the standard. Such objects may be seen as results of actions that have been performed at some point in time by an individual (Norris 2007). By applying the concept of frozen action to language standardisation, language standards are analysed as mediated actions, a result of social actions performed in the past. Accordingly, a nexus analysis of social practices shows how language users embrace, accept and contest discourses of revitalisation and language standardisation to varying degrees and for a wide range of reasons.

Keywords: Nexus Analysis, Language standardisation, Social Actors.