

A North Saami dialect dictionary in a new format

SKÅDEN, ASBJØRG (ed.). 2022. *Márkku sánit*. Ravda Lágádus. (Android app.)

North Saami is spoken in a vast area covering northernmost Norway, Sweden, and Finland. This area, comparable to Hungary in size, is home to considerable dialectal variation. While it is understandable that the North Saami literary standard language is based on the most populous of these varieties – the so-called Finnmark (Finnmark) or Inland dialects – this also has the side effect that other varieties are seldom represented in grammars, dictionaries, or teaching materials.

Among these marginalized dialects is the western variety of Čohkkiras (Jukkasjärvi) North Saami, spoken in the border area of Nordlândia (Nordland) and the former county of Romsa (Troms) in Norway. From the 1980s onwards, a small group of language activists have worked on the revitalization of this critically endangered dialect, sometimes referred to as *márko-sámeigiella* (or *markasamisk* in Norwegian). A significant milestone in this effort is the publication of the thematic North Saami–Norwegian dialect dictionary *Márkku sánit* in

2010, edited by teacher and publisher Asbjørg Skåden (1946–2020) and based mainly on recordings made in the 1980s and 1990s. Unfortunately, this primary data was lost in a house fire in 2017 (p.c. Asbjørg Skåden, 2018), leaving the edited dictionary as a monument of this important work.

This dictionary, which has been out of print for some time, has now been republished as a free app for Apple and Android devices as a result of a cooperation between the local Saami language center Várdo-báiki and the publisher Ravda Lágádus. While this digital version largely corresponds to the printed dictionary, the app has several advantages compared to its paper predecessor. Most importantly, it provides North Saami lemmas in alphabetical order in addition to the thematic grouping of entries, as well as the possibility to search for words both in North Saami and Norwegian.

Unlike some other digital dictionaries of North Saami, the app does not require – or even allow – the use of special characters in search queries. Instead, a search for the letter *c*, for instance, yields results for both *c* and *č*. It is also possible to search for parts of words

using a percent sign as a wildcard, although this information is not conveyed in the app itself. A minor drawback of the app is that it lacks the background information found in the front and back matter of the 2010 book, including names of the contributors to the project. Also omitted are the photographs and illustrations of the print edition.

The number of words and expressions in the dictionary is hard to estimate, in part due to some lemmas being listed under several semantic fields. However, the total number of entries, including idioms, is well above 5,000. The app covers many different domains, ranging from body parts and kinship terms to names of insects and units of measurement. The editor deserves praise for the inclusion of not only single lexemes but also greetings, proverbs, and nursery rhymes, as well as curse words and obscenities. Parents-to-be and scholars of onomastics will be equally delighted to find many proper names included, although first names are only found in the thematic section of the app and not in the alphabetical listing of lemmas. Also very welcome is a section on discourse markers (“småord i en samtale”). The use of many words is further shown through example sentences, albeit often without accompanying translations. All in

all, this makes the app potentially useful for a wide audience, ranging from local language learners to seasoned scholars. Members of the latter group will in particular appreciate the inclusion of a number of words that appear to be unattested in other North Saami dictionaries, e.g. *suovvu* ‘widening in the mouth of a river’, *veavgut* ‘burr (only about ptarmigan)’, and *čeassa* ‘rennet (for making cheese)’ (< Norwegian *kjæsa*, *kjæse* etc.).

For linguists, however, use of the dictionary is made difficult by a lack of basic grammatical information, such as the consonant gradation of lemmas. Furthermore, its value for scholars is marred by opaque transcription principles. In the preface to the print edition, it is explicitly stated that the dictionary is not normalized, and while it is clear that no systematic normalization of lemmas has taken place, it nevertheless appears that many words have been rendered closer to the standard language than they are in the local dialect. For instance, the dictionary features words with the dental fricatives *đ* and *ʈ*, which to my knowledge are not found in this variety, e.g. <*ođđamánnu*> ‘new moon’ and <*muotta*> ‘aunt, mother’s sister’ (dialectal *odda-*, *muohtá*, standard *ođđa-*, *muottá*). In some cases, forms with *đ* and *d* are given

as separate headwords, implying a nonexistent opposition between e.g. <godđit> ‘weave’ and <goddit> ‘knit’ (dialectal *goddit*, standard *godđit* ‘weave, knit’). Conversely, the counterparts of Standard North Saami *láddi* ‘(Finnish-speaking) settler’ and *láđđi* ‘broadcloth’ are both rendered as <láđđi>.

Other entries mix features of the standard language and the local dialect, e.g. <jotŋa> ‘lingonberry’ (dialectal *jotnja*, standard *jokŋa*). Also particularly common is the rendering of etymologically long *á* as short *a* (as in the above-mentioned <muotta>) and of short *a* as long *á*. While such spellings may sometimes reflect the actual pronunciation of the dialect, this is not always the case, as in e.g. <háddi> ‘price’ (pro *haddi*). Notably, more apparent typos from the printed volume have also been carried over to the digital edition, e.g. <gangggahit> ‘lie stretched out’, with three *g*’s.

These shortcomings in transcription have practical implications – for instance, a form such as <oabba> ‘sister’ (pro *oabbá*) implies an inaccurate illative singular **obbii* (pro *oabbái*). Additionally, the imprecise rendering of lemmas

makes comparison with other varieties challenging. To name but one example, the word <guobčá> ‘large, big-boned person’ should likely read *guobža* instead, corresponding to the form *guobžá* ‘exceptionally large animal, object’ in Just Knud Qvigstad’s (1853–1957) word list from the same area (n.d., available online at the National Library of Norway; also published as Skåden et al. 2004, 2008, cf. Aikio 2006). Judging from Qvigstad’s form, this word is a regular reflex of Proto-Saamic **kuomčę* (cf. Standard North Saami *guovža* ‘bear’), showing the same consonantism in this variety as *lábži* ‘rein’ (<**lāmčē*, cf. Standard North Saami *lávži*). Were the form <guobčá> to be taken at face value, this cognate relationship would perhaps have gone unnoticed.

Such criticism notwithstanding, it must be recognized that *Márkku sánit* is the result of an enormous effort by dedicated language activists. Although scholars should use it only with great care, the dictionary contains interesting data that is now more accessible than ever for linguists and local language users alike.

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References

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