

The Language of Children in Bilingual Families in Finland

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Introduction

Thanks to the relatively high quality of statistics, it has been possible to study the demography of the two language groups in Finland in detail. Data on the size and the age structure are available for every tenth year since 1880, and since 1950 there are more detailed census data including e.g. education and socio-economic variables. Since 1978 language is included in almost all of the annual vital statistics.

From the Swedish-speaking population's point of view, one of the most prominent characteristics of the development of population and society in Finland during the last decades is the increasing mixture of the two language groups. In the beginning of this century, about three-fourths of the Swedish-speaking population constituted a local majority. A huge in-migration of Finns from other parts of the country to the Swedish settlement area combined with an out-migration of Swedes has reduced this proportion to less than a half. The Finnish element has also entered into the smallest social unit, the family. Since the late 70s the number of contracted mixed marriages has exceeded the number of unilingual Swedish ones.

It is the existence of mixed marriages that makes the demographic study of sub-populations e.g. language groups special (Finnäs, 1988). First of all, mixed marriages have a direct quantitative effect on the populations through the classification of the children. Secondly, there may also be qualitative effects, since the children do not necessarily identify themselves as belonging to only one group, but rather to both. Among social scientists the frequency of mixed marriages has been considered to be the most conclusive and objective indicator of a minority (see, e.g. Mittelbach and Moore, 1968). As a demographer, I have mainly concentrated on the quantitative effects of mixed marriages, in the way that they appear in the official statistics. In this paper I shall illustrate the effect of language shifts and registration, concentrating on the children in bilingual families.

The diminishing number of Swedes, in an absolute as well as in a relative respect, had led to a questioning of the equal rights of the Swedes and the bilingualism of Finland. In some people's opinion, the disappearance of the Swedish-speaking population in Finland is just a matter of time. Therefore, the attitudes towards the Swedes have hardened (Herberts, 1988). However, this is not true for all of the Finns, and many leaders and prominent persons have spoken out in unmistakable defence of the Swedish population and language in Finland. In my opinion, bilingual families must be very sensitive to the climate between the language groups, and their attitudes should be reflected in how they register their children. Therefore, the Swedish proportion of the children in bilingual families is considered to be an indicator of the attitudes towards the language.

The bilingual families

Before we start to study the actual problem, some comments on the data and the frequency of mixed marriages are required. The study is based on census data only, the language information of which was extracted from the central population register. Therefore, the information about language group was given by the head of the household according to the criterion »Mother tongue». For each person either »Finnish» or »Swedish» had to be chosen (foreign languages neglected), and the concept »Bilingual» does not exist. The language information has been checked annually in connection with the domicile registration. The »mother tongue» is, of course, not necessarily the same as »the language of the mother» and it may be changed. As will be illustrated below, changes have occurred.

The concepts »bilingual families» and »mixed marriages» refer to couples in which the spouses belong to different language groups in a statistical sense. It is important, however, to remember that we have no information about the actual use of the languages. This means that a formally bilingual family may, in practice, be unilingual, and both languages may be used in a formally unilingual family. For the children, the official language is also uncertain in many cases. For those who are practically bilingual, the registration is more or less arbitrary, and for newborn babies it may be impossible to judge what their future language will be. Therefore, the data certainly reflect the desire of the parents to a high degree, and the registered language does not necessarily have to be the actual main language of the child. Several studies have shown that there are evident discrepancies between the registered and actual language in bilingual families (Sirkka, 1971; Laurén, 1984 and Högnäs-Sandström, 1988).

In my previous studies, I have shown that the language must be of minor importance in the mate selection process (Finnäs, 1986). The proportion of mixed marriages in a municipality is, therefore, proportional to the relative sizes of the language groups, and it is now rather close to what would be expected in a situation where the selection is done randomly with respect to language. During the last decade it falls short by only a good 20 percent from the theoretical value. In my opinion, the composition of the marriage market is also the main explanation of the fact that the number of marriages of the type »Swedish man and Finnish woman» has been much more common than the combination »Finnish man and Swedish woman». At the national level the number of mixed marriages has exceeded the number of unilingual Swedish marriages since the mid-seventies. During the period 1981—85 the mean annual number of mixed marriages contracted was 1,129 (674 of the type Swedish man + Finnish woman and 455 of the type Finnish man + Swedish woman) whereas the number of unilingual Swedish marriages was only 825. At present about one-third of the children registered as Swedish have a bilingual background.

The language of the children

The most decisive factor for the language of the children in bilingual families is the language of the mother (Fougstedt and Hartman, 1956; Forsberg, 1975; Finnäs, 1986). Therefore the two types of bilingual families are studied separately in Table 1, where the Swedish proportion of the children is given in 1980 and 1985. According to these figures, the bilingual families have apparently been influenced more by the positive than the negative arguments in the debate during the last decade. The proportion of the children registered as Swedish-speaking has risen remarkably from 1980 to 1985. In the families where the mothers were Finnish, the Swedish

porportion of the 0—4-year-old children has risen from 33.3 to 37.9 percent and in the families with Swedish mothers the proportion increased from 49.9 to 60.8 percent. Following the different birth cohorts from 1980 to 1985, we can also observe an increasing Swedish proportion, indicating language shifts from Finnish to Swedish.

To get an idea of the magnitude of the changes in absolute numbers in different parts of the country, I have calculated expected numbers of Swedish children in 1985 according to the actual total number of children in 1985 and the Swedish proportions in 1980. The Swedish net gain of the registration of newborn children, i.e. the observed number of Swedish children aged 0—4 years minus the expected one, is presented in Table 2. To estimate the net gain of language shifts, I have also followed the cohort born in 1976—80 from 1980 to 1985. The results presented in Table 2 below are given in exact figures, but in practice they must, of course, be considered to be guidelines of the magnitude only.

The majority of all bilingual families can be found in the province of Uusimaa, and there the pressure from the Finnish majority is strongest. Therefore, the effect is also most evident there. The higher Swedish proportions in Uusimaa in 1985 resulted

Table 1. The Swedish proportion of all children in bilingual families in 1980 and 1985.

Swedish father + Finnish mother

	0—4	5—9	10—14
1980	33.3	34.3	34.8
1985	37.9	35.5	35.2

Finnish father + Swedish mother

	0—4	5—9	10—14
1980	49.9	49.0	45.0
1985	60.8	53.6	50.2

Table 2. The number of children in bilingual families by age and language of the parents in different provinces 1980 and 1985.

Province		1980		1985				Estimated Swedish gain	
		0—4		0—4		5—9		0—4	5—9
		Total	Swedish	Total	Swedish	Total	Swedish		
Uusimaa	FS*	2261	1149	2446	1549	2189	1214	306	102
	SF	3062	897	3241	1116	3062	968	167	71
Turku and Pori	FS	471	234	459	269	471	259	41	25
	SF	654	224	660	243	620	219	17	7
Åland	FS	28	27	32	28	26	25	-3	0
	SF	90	77	132	123	109	89	10	-4
Vaasa	FS	831	492	939	599	857	505	43	-2
	SF	1246	532	1193	542	1325	595	33	29
Other	FS	381	80	318	107	408	114	40	28
	SF	319	59	335	83	359	75	21	9
Finland	FS	3972	1982	4194	2552	3951	2117	459**	145
	SF	5371	1789	5561	2107	5475	1946	255	122

* Finnish father + Swedish mother.

** The figures for Finland are calculated separately, and do not exactly coincide with the total of the different regions.

in an increase of the 0—4-year-old children by some 450—500, i.e. almost 100 per year. In ordinary demographic terms this means that the Swedish reproduction was a good 7 percent higher in 1981—85 than it would have been under the conditions in 1976—80. I have calculated the corresponding figures for the metropolitan area, and there the increase was a good 12 percent. At the national level the net gain of around 700 corresponds to a relative increase of a good 4 percent.

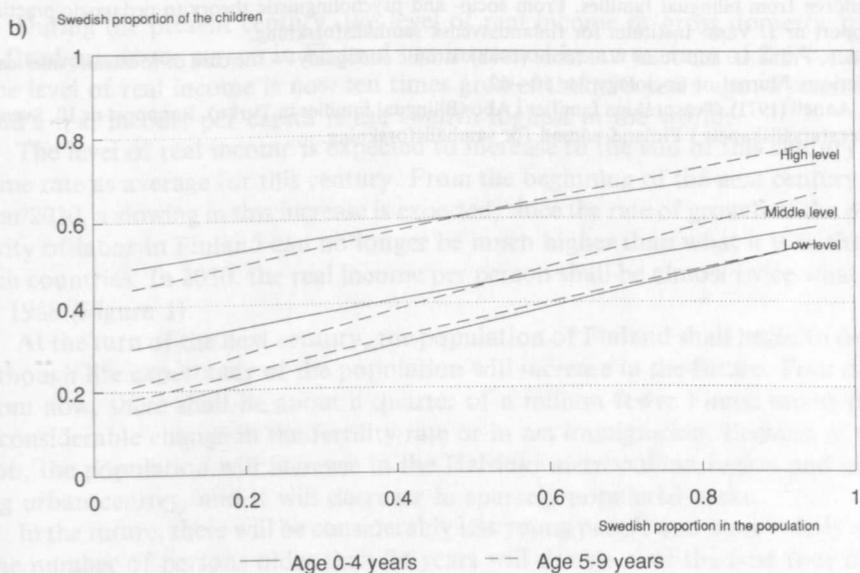
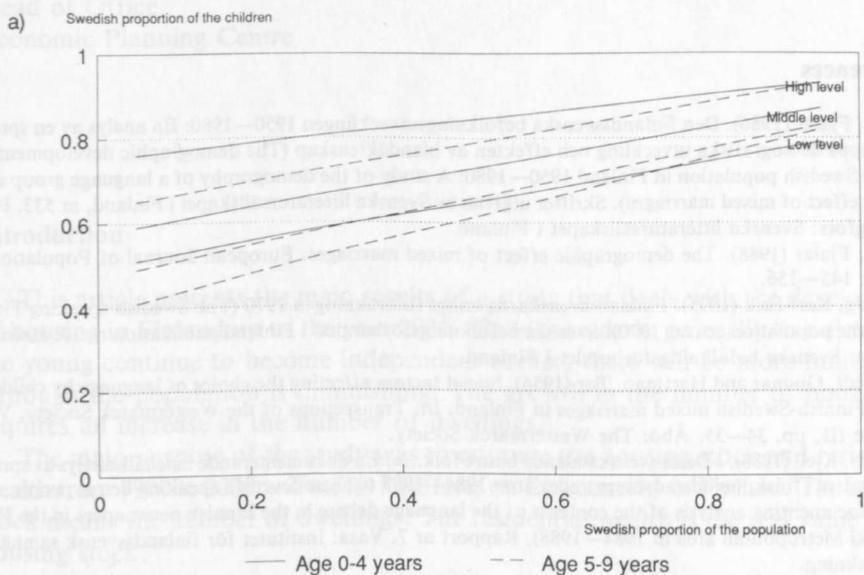
The net effect of the language shifts in the cohort born in 1976—80 is some 250 persons, which means that the total gain for the Swedish population, due to changes in the registration of children under the age of 10 years in bilingual families, was about 1,000 persons in 1985 as compared to the situation in 1980.

From the figures presented in the tables above, the great importance of the language of the mother is evident. In several studies the language structure of the municipalities where the bilingual families live has also turned out to be a decisive factor. Using data from 1985, I shall present some results to illustrate the importance of this and also another variable, namely education. The mothers were classified into three groups according to their level of education: comprehensive school only, second level and third level (i.e. matriculation examination or higher). The results are given by regression lines calculated for each group separately in Figure 1.

The education variable refers to the mother, but since I have found that the correlation between the levels of both spouses is high, one can probably consider it to be an overall educational level of the family, as well. The conclusion is, then, that the higher the level of education, the higher the proportion of Swedish children. In my opinion, this expresses a more positive attitude towards Swedish, or that parents with higher education realize the advantage of bilingualism. At least in Finnish-dominated areas, a »Swedish» child from a bilingual family also becomes more or less bilingual, while a »Finnish» child becomes much more unilingual. Comparing the lines for the age groups 0—4 and 5—9 years, we see that the increase of the Swedish proportion is more prominent in the Finnish-dominated areas and especially in the families where the mothers are Swedish. In the families with Finnish mothers with a low level of education, there seems to be no change at all.

Since both language groups are guaranteed equal rights, a person's »mother tongue» in the official statistics has no direct consequences for the individual. In a situation where there evidently is a considerable number of families for whom the language registration is rather arbitrary, I think that we should not be too serious about the language statistics and the exact numbers of Swedish- and Finnish-speaking persons. However, these statistics have to be studied, since they are used for planning and decision making, and it is important to know where and when they are applicable. At the national level, the impact of bilingualism is almost negligible from the majority's point of view, and therefore the importance of the effect has not been fully understood in other situations, either. The language statistics are probably a good tool for their original and main purpose, namely for decisions about the official language of administrative units, e.g. municipalities, but there are also cases where they should not be used. One example of a situation where the official figures clearly fail is when they are used in estimating the need for Swedish day-care. Another similar illustration of the problem is that the number of new pupils in the Swedish schools clearly exceeds the number of Swedish children in the official statistics. This is so since the parents are free to choose the educational language, irrespective of the registered mother tongue of the child. During the last decade the annual difference has been some 200 children, meaning an increase of the number of Swedish-speaking children in a birth cohort by a good six percent. In some regions the difference has exceeded one-tenth.

Figure 1. The Swedish proportion of the children in bilingual families by language structure of the place of residence, age and mother's level of education.
 a) Finnish father and Swedish mother
 b) Swedish father and Finnish mother



My conclusion from this study is that the official language statistics can illustrate important changes and trends, but we must not take the figures too literally. Especially in bilingual families it is almost impossible, and perhaps irrelevant, to classify the children as Finnish or Swedish, and therefore these statistics should be used with great caution and sensitivity.

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