According to common opinion in contemporary Finland, it is easy to differentiate between the country’s citizens speaking either Finnish or Swedish as their first language. The way to do it is to take public transport in Helsinki. Speakers of Finnish are either silent or they speak under their breath, while speakers of Swedish behave ostentatiously noisily, eliciting bitter remarks from the Finnish speakers. Such a view, based on a behavioral contrast, clearly refers to slightly ironically perceived ethnic and national stereotypes. It is more funny than essentially justified – and that is exactly why we cannot consider this one example exclusively.

1. Historical Introduction

Being an independent country since 1917, Finland has never been seen as a heterogeneous society. According to well-respected Finnish politician Jan-Magnus Jansson, “(...) the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking inhabitants of the country (...) have always considered themselves as one nation, sharing the same basic values. This means in particular that the Swedish-speaking group cannot be perceived as a national minority in the usual sense”\(^1\). The quoted opinion requires a comment, though, if we apply it to a longer historical period. From the mid-12\(^{th}\) century the area of contemporary Finland was the aim of crusades, initiated by Sweden, already a Christian nation, and the consequence of it was an

influx of the settlers from that country. As a result, in the mentioned area Finno-Ugric people became neighbors with Swedish settlers, who in time created compact settlements, first of all in the south and middle- and south-west of Finland. Until as late as 1809 its territory was ruled by Swedish monarchs. After the mentioned date Finland was incorporated into the Russian Empire – this time with autonomous rights - and it came to be called The Grand Duchy of Finland. The name as such was officially used until winning independence by the Republic of Finland in 1917.

It is difficult to speak of some unified Finnish nation under the Swedish rule. The reason was a stronger and stronger position of people of Swedish origin visible in the fields of politics, economy and culture. Their representatives took the most important posts within the first two fields and Swedish had the status of the official language, whose use – especially since the 17th century – symbolized a person’s place in the educated elite. On the contrary, the Finnish language was limited mostly to being a means of communication between administration of the Protestant (Lutheran) Church and the faithful, especially in the countryside and in the poorer town districts. Administrative and linguistic dominance of Swedish was also kept under Russian rule. The final, formal equality of both languages was implemented and confirmed in Article 14 of the Constitution of an already independent Finland from 1919. The article says: “The national languages of the Republic shall be Finnish and Swedish. (…) the rights of the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking population of the country shall be provided for according to the same principles. The cultural and economic needs of the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking population shall be satisfied by the State according to the same principles.” As we may see only the unification of both languages’ status combined with the equality of all citizens in the light of law significantly influenced the shaping of the Finnish nation in the modern sense. This led to

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describing the Swedish-speaking group as language (or linguistical, but not national) minority, being thus a specific type of an ethnic group.\(^8\)

2. Basic terms

Without going too deep into consideration of the terms ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic group’ we can assume that “at the heart of ethnicity is the feeling of ‘being special’”\(^9\). Due to Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan ethnicity is perceived as “(…) a tendency by people to insist on the significance of their distinctiveness and identity and on the rights that derive from this group character”\(^10\). There is no doubt both quoted authors are inspired by Max Weber’s classic definition of an ethnic group who claims that it is “(…) a human collectivity based on an assumption of common origin, real or imagined”\(^11\). The elements of vital importance for an ethnic group are: culture, especially language and religion; genealogy, including race and origin; special personality features and occupied territory\(^12\). Ethnic groups, if compared with nations “(…) are usually smaller; (…) more clearly based on a common ancestry; and (…) more pervasive in human history, while nations are perhaps specific to time and place”\(^13\).

Ethnic groups if brought also into the political arena remain an object of interest for ethnic politics (ethnopolitics). According to Joseph Rothschild the latter term may adopt three substantial forms: conflictual, competitive, or cooperative\(^14\). Thus ethnicity within political space becomes a politicized ethnicity which refers to “(…) the crucial principle of political legitimation and delegitimation of systems, states, regimes, and governments and at the same time [remains – added by WK] an effective instrument for pressing mundane interests in society’s competition for power, status, and wealth”\(^15\). Summing up ethnic groups “(…) are largely concerned with the protection of rights for members of the group within the existing


\(^11\) *Us and Them ...*, p. 20.


\(^15\) Ibidem, p. 2.
state (…)"^{16}, sometimes with and sometimes with no claim for territorial homeland. In principle the claim as such does not refer to the Swedish-speaking Finns.

The notion of *minority*, though – in the general sense – is interpreted in manifold ways by many authors. It is essential to specifically understand it in the way of social sciences’ various disciplines. This is confirmed by a compilation definition of Polish historian, Jerzy Tomaszewski, which says that minorities are “(...) communities permanently inhabiting some territory (especially countries), different from majority of its inhabitants (or from politically dominant community) in the feature (or features) that cause perceiving them as different in the society’s consciousness and may cause discrimination in social relations; such feature might be religion, language, national consciousness, culture, etc.”^{17}. With such a view, the main criterion for defining the notion of minority becomes position occupied by the group to which we refer. It is because: “Sociologists include some handicap feature into the definition of minority, taking into consideration its situation, not number”, hence defining it “(...) not [as a static - added by WK] demographic category but as dynamic political standing”^{18}. Thus “minorities are subgroups within a culture which are distinguishable from the dominant group by reason of differences in physiognomy, language, customs, or culture-patterns (...)”^{19}. For they do not belong to the dominant group “(...) they are consciously or unconsciously excluded from full participation in the life of the culture”^{20}.

On this background we could sometimes see an interesting paradox where a group being a minority in terms of statistics gained a privileged position in relation to the statistical majority^{21}, hence “the numerical majority may be treated like a minority and often is”^{22}. Such model of mutual relations, based on the rule of domination (political, economic or cultural) of a less numerous group over the more numerous one occurred many times, e.g. within the British colonial empire (South Africa, Cyprus, India, Ireland, Palestine) or in Dutch East India. It also became typical just of Finland while it belonged to Sweden and then to Russia. It also left traces in the mentality of Finnish-speaking inhabitants of already independent

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^{16} J.G. Kellas, op.cit., p. 6.
^{19} R.A. Schermerhorn, *These Our People: Minorities in American Culture*, Boston 1949, p. 5.
^{20} Ibidem.
^{22} R.A. Schermerhorn, op.cit., p. 6.
Finland, who perceived the Swedish-speaking group as better off and better educated. This was visible still for many decades.

The term ‘national minority’ is close to the notion of minority as such. Despite this, it is not a homogenous category, nor is it easy to designate. It is proved by the usually failed attempts at formulating a useful and generally accepted definition of national minority, undertaken practically throughout the 20th century within the frame of international law. The combination of the adjective national with the notion of minority makes sense if we assume that “(...) minority groups usually inhabit compact, often bordering areas and continue relationships with the state or country of origin which is their foreign metropolis”.

In turn, such a situation might take place because: “Originating of national minorities is connected with the processes of mass emigration, annexation of a part of a country’s territory by another one, change of country’s borders due to international agreements, etc.”

It seems that those and similar criteria should objectively favour recognizing Swedish-speaking Finland inhabitants as a national minority. That it is not so is due to historical experiences in co-existence of both language groups and hence stemming of legal guarantees for the citizens of unitary Finnish state. On the one hand, the creators of independent Finland aimed at strengthening the national consciousness among its inhabitants, brought together by common origin and geographical homeland; on the other, at legal guarantees for specific features of its particular elements, especially the less numerous group. The concession given to the latter by the newly created state was the constitutional recognition of bilingualism and adoption of proper legal measures. In reaction to this, an overwhelming majority of the Swedish-speaking people finally accepted their special minority status, described as language minority, for whom Sweden was a ‘foreign’ metropolis, although perceived in sentimental and cultural, not geopolitical, categories.


The situation is a little different if we consider almost exclusively Swedish-speaking inhabitants of the Åland Islands, now fully demilitarized region\(^{26}\), who – at the beginning of Finnish independence – referred to historical end ethnic relations with Sweden, opposing joining the Republic of Finland. It changed for the better after the law issued in 1920 by the Finnish parliament that granted wide territorial autonomy to the Islands, with local assembly and executive\(^{27}\). Their status as a part of Finnish state was confirmed in 1921 by the League of Nations. The law was first implemented in 1922, with some modifications later, in 1951 and 1993 in particular. *The Autonomy Act for the Åland Islands* guarantees that this Finnish province is unilingually Swedish. In time it appeared that it had been a successful legal experiment, adding to the strengthening of loyalty of the Islands’ inhabitants towards the Republic of Finland. On the other hand, contrary to the Swedish-speaking people living in continental Finland, they still tend to consider themselves a part of Swedish nationality. Since 1970 the Åland Islands has had its own representation in the Nordic Council. In the last decade of the twentieth century, Anders Eriksson, an influential local politician, opened a debate on Islands’ chances to become an independent microstate. The debate however did not receive a significant support from their inhabitants\(^{28}\).

3. **Numbers, Area Distribution and Legal Status of the Swedish-Speaking Minority**

Since the beginning of the second half of the 19\(^{th}\) century, the number of Finnish citizens speaking Swedish as a first means of communication has been constantly decreasing. Their numbers in the population were as follows: 14.3% in 1880, 12.9% in 1900, 11% in 1920, 9.6% in 1940, 8.6% in 1950, 7.4% in 1960, 6.6% in 1970, 6.2% in the mid-1980s, 5.7% in 1997, and 5.5% currently. In absolute numbers, this means that the country is now inhabited by less than 290 thousand people speaking Swedish as their first language\(^{29}\).

\(^{26}\) M. Ohberg (ed.), *The Åland Islands: Demilitarized Region*, Mariehamn 1995


Speakers of Swedish have traditionally been inhabiting Åland Islands and coasts of three Finnish provinces situated in the west and south of the country: Ostrobothnia (Österbotten in Swedish), Turku-Pori (Åbo-Björneborg) and Uusimaa (Nyland). Earlier quoted J.M. Jansson, in the interview given to the author on 21st November 1989, stated that in Åland Islands they constitute almost 95% of the inhabitants, and in some countryside communes and seaside towns of continental Finland they constitute a small majority. In Helsinki, the state capital, their number is about 10% and still decreasing, mostly owing to increasing number of mixed marriages and low birth rate.

Article 14 of the Constitution provides for equality of both languages, which obligates the state to guarantee it in different fields of social life. It is also ensured by other articles of the Constitution, as well as by legal acts of lower rank. Parliamentary bills and presidential decrees, as well as all communication between the government and the parliament, should be conducted in both languages (Art. 22). According to Section 88 of the Parliament Act of 1928, Parliament should use both Finnish and Swedish in its works. Despite such assumptions, there are exceptions to the rule, and more often it is Swedish that is put to limitations. And so, discussions in parliamentary commissions are usually conducted in Finnish but the reports are published in both languages. According to Article 75 of the Constitution, the language used in the army and in the police forces is practically Finnish; on the other hand a conscript has the right of being delegated to a sub-unit where other soldiers speak his language and where, as a consequence, he would receive orders in ‘his’ language.

Guarantees concerning mono- or bilingualism in the place of residence are particularly important in the social sense. State authorities are obligated to implement the combination of two conditions, described as individual (or personal) and territorial. The former is to be understood as the right of a citizen to choose ‘his/her’ language and, as a consequence, to use it in contacts with the authorities, while the latter as the fact of concentration of the Swedish-speaking population only in selected small areas of the country.

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33 Compare: E. Allardt, Bilingualism in Finland: The position of Swedish as a Minority Language [in:] W.R. Beer, J.E. Jacob (eds.), Language Policy and National Unity, Totowa (New Jersey) 1985, p. 93-94; J.
Legal assumptions for the compromise in this matter were accepted on 1\textsuperscript{st} June 1922, on the basis of two legal acts: the Language Act and the Knowledge of Languages Required of Civil Servants Act. In its original form, the earlier provided for giving a bilingual status to basic administrative self-governing units (city or village commune, if minority inhabiting it and using the second official language constituted 8% or more of the general number of inhabitants). Additional assumptions were introduced in case of frequent changes of proportions – and so, a commune once declared bilingual, loses this status only when the minority number goes below 6%. On the other hand, regaining of a bilingual status by a commune that is monolingual at the moment requires the minority number to reach the level of 12% of the whole population. Required percentage has also been complemented by definite numbers, as demanded by the Swedish-speaking minority, afraid that limiting the requirements to percentage numbers only will result in decreasing the number of bilingual communes. These fears were mostly connected with three big cities – Helsinki (Helsingfors in Swedish), Turku (Åbo) and Vaasa (Vasa), traditionally inhabited by large number of Swedish-speaking people. Their number began to fall rapidly owing to the fast influx of Finnish-speaking population seeking better working and living conditions. That is why, first in 1962, and then in 1975 it was established that recognizing a commune as bilingual requires it to be inhabited by, respectively, over 5000 and 3000 people speaking the minority language, disregarding the overall percentage of the minority. The decision on a commune’s status is made by the government every ten years. The Language Act obligates civil servants to publish documents and announcements in the language – or languages – used by local community. The other act mentioned obligates civil servants working in bilingual areas to pass exams in fluent command of both Finnish and Swedish\textsuperscript{34}.

The whole of Finland is divided into 461 municipalities. From that number – at the end of the twentieth century - there were 26 monolingual Swedish municipalities, 39 – bilingual and 396 – monolingual Finnish\textsuperscript{35}.

\textsuperscript{34} Compare: J.M. Jansson, op.cit., p. 83-85; K. Liebkind, op.cit., p. 95; F. Nyberg, op.cit., p. 54; M. Stephens, op.cit., p. 276-278.

4. Selected Guarantees for Educational Status

Keeping own language and other cultural aspects is a necessary condition for an ethnic group to survive and develop. That is why effective guarantees for minority’s rights in this matter have been from the beginning the prerequisite for conflict-free relations between both language groups in Finland.

The state is obligated to support educational institutions from the lowest to the highest level, along the country’s linguistic considerations. Schools with Swedish as the language of instruction are managed by a special department within the National Board of General Education. In practice, the whole segment of the educational system based on Swedish as language of instruction enjoys significant independence. It has at its disposal a separate administrative system, managing to work out its own teacher education system, as well as schoolbooks and scientific aid publications. Sweden grants significant help in this aspect\(^{36}\).

Within primary and secondary education, there are no bilingual schools in the sense of educational institutions where both languages are languages of instruction. Present legal regulations concerning primary education obligate local authorities to start the educational process in the minority’s language if the number of children speaking the language amounts to 18 or more. Practice shows that majority of schools work in separate buildings as monolingual ones. It should be stressed that in both types of schools – those using exclusively Swedish as well as those using exclusively Finnish – pupils have to learn the other official language as well. Swedish-speaking students study Finnish starting usually in the third grade. The contrary is less consistent: only a minority of Finnish speakers respect this requirement; in most cases studying Swedish starts in the seventh grade. In higher grades of both types of school studying the other language is obligatory everywhere\(^{37}\).

Within university education bilingualism seems to appear in only two Helsinki higher education institutions: the University and the University of Technology. In the former, classes and exams are usually conducted in Finnish, and this language is also used by the University’s administration. The \textit{University Act} and a special \textit{University Language Act} enumerate the units within the University (departments or institutes), where Swedish is the language of

\(^{36}\) Compare: S.E. Hansen, op.cit., p. 81; J.M. Jansson, op.cit., p. 86.
\(^{37}\) Compare: ibidem; S.E. Hansen, op.cit., p. 79; M. Stephens, op.cit., p. 278.
instruction. In the 1980s there were 23 such units out of 180. The bill also ensures that university teachers and students have the right to use ‘their’ language during exams.38

Apart from the two above mentioned institutions, the others have a monolingual status, predominantly Finnish. Swedish as both the language for instruction and administration appears in only three places. The first one is a private university in Turku, founded in 1918 and commonly known as Åbo Akademi. The other two are state institutions situated in Helsinki: one of them is Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration, colloquially called Hanken and the other – Swedish School of Social Science and Local Administration. The latter formally remains a part of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Helsinki University.39

This working consensus between both language groups in Finland dates a few decades back already. Presented legal and educational status of the Swedish-speaking minority is its main criterion. At the same time we must not forget its other signs which definitely deserve presentation in a separate work. Now let us only recall that the Swedish-speaking population is still markedly visible in the economic sphere, although we would not perceive them nowadays as dominant over the Finnish-speaking majority.

The Swedish speakers give their lasting and significant support to their most important political representation, liberal-conservative Swedish People’s Party (Svenska Folkpartiet, SFP), which often participates in the governing process as a coalition partner or influences the government’s current policy. Initially the Swedish speakers mobilized themselves politically in the second half of the nineteenth century and consequently a first Swedish Party emerged in the 1870s and ‘80s. It was then an entirely elitist party. The 1906 parliamentary reform transformed Finnish party politics. It forced also this party to modernize her programme, structure and political appeal. The new Swedish People’s Party sought the support of the whole of the linguistic minority. Despite some turbulences in the decades 1930/1940s the party remained unified and currently has 9 seats in the Finnish Eduskunta (Riksdag) unicameral parliament.40

38 J.M. Jansson, op.cit., p. 86.
39 Ibidem.
The Swedish-speakers have their own church organization, trade unions, cultural, including four professional theatres and sport associations. As far as this minority position is concerned the publishing agencies are very active: 15 newspapers are issued in Swedish on daily or weekly basis. The largest one, Hufvudstadsbladet, a daily published in Helsinki is issued in 70,000 copies. There are also radio and television channels broadcasting in Swedish\textsuperscript{41}.

Even without finding more arguments it is plain to see that the status gained by this minority is unique, especially if we compare it to the situation of ethnic and national minorities in various European countries, not talking about other continents. One can even formulate the thesis that such position is a model one reflecting “the almost idyllic north” phenomenon within the interethnic relations in contemporary Europe\textsuperscript{42}.

\textsuperscript{41} K. Liebkind, op.cit., p. 97.
An Abstract

While observing Finland in recent decades it is plain to see that the position gained by the Swedish-speaking minority in this country is quite unique, especially if we compare it with the situation of ethnic and national minorities in other European countries. One can even risk the thesis that such position is a model one in definitely positive sense of this notion. The anticipation of approximate conflict in the beginning of the Finnish independent statehood was significantly mitigated by the legal regulations in terms of generally political rights, granted to this minority and long-lasting guarantees to its educational status in particular. Swedish speakers in Finland have their own schools, universities, religious and generally cultural organizations and institutions (including theatres), sport associations, trade unions, newspapers and journals. They have got a guarantee to do military service together with other Swedish speaking soldiers. An asset in terms of this minority’s political participation on every day basis is a significant role played by the Swedish People’s Party (SVP), which represents minority and was actively involved in many coalition governments in Finland for decades. The Swedish speakers were perceived in Finland as cultural, economic and political elite for centuries. The perception as such seems to be not so vital in contemporary Finnish socio-political realities anymore. One can not exclude a possibility of certain conflicts, but they are definitely of minor as well as local nature.