

Language policy and Finnish science

Summary

This paper is based on a report on the current status and relationship between Finnish, the main national language of Finland, and English, the lingua franca of today. The report, *Suomen kielen tila ja tulevaisuus* ('The status and future of the Finnish language') is available on the Internet (www.kotus.fi), with a summary in Swedish and English.

Language policy has traditionally been understood as dealing with domestic issues, the relationship between the two national languages, Finnish and Swedish, and to a lesser degree with the situation of minority languages, e.g. the Saami languages or the sign language used by the handicapped. Finland has a specific language law (dating from 1923, revised 2003) to protect Finnish, and it is because of this that there is not the same awareness of the present linguistic situation as one finds in the other Nordic and Baltic countries, where the governments have set up committees and issued strategies to protect the domestic languages from expansive influences from outside, notably the use of English in all walks of life.

It became quite clear from our investigation that the language law does not automatically guarantee the preservation of Fin-

nish in schools, higher education or research. In all of these spheres the use and influence of English is growing, without the existence of any generally accepted strategy. More and more schools are offering English as their language of instruction, while in the universities there have as yet been few strategic papers specifying everyday practices with regard to the languages to be used in teaching. The expansion and appreciation of English in universities and scientific societies is unquestionable, and the issues that need sorting out are the future of the scientific journals that use Finnish, the balance between Finnish and English in university teaching programmes, and the fairness of the evaluation of scientific publications. If the scientific community turns its back on the general public by not publishing in Finnish and by developing a separate language of science, it will clearly be violating the democratic rights of the people to receive information and the products of learning in their mother tongue.

What is advocated in the report is a *policy of parallel languages*, not a return to the 19th century ideals of one nation, one language. The most important step to be taken at the government level is the setting up of a committee to work out a nation-wide linguistic strategy, a document on which different communities and institutions – including the scientific societies – could base their future strategies.