

# Language rights principles and language rights practice: The case of spoken Swedish and Finland-Swedish Sign Language in Finland

Lieselott Nordman

Satu Siltaloppi

University of Helsinki

Finland has one of the oldest legislations of language rights in the world. The Language Act was passed as early as 1922 (LA, updated 423/2003), to ensure “the constitutional right of every person to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts and other authorities”. The Language Act considers only spoken language.

Thereby, one form of language is foreseen: signed language. There are two autochthonous sign languages in Finland: Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) and Finland-Swedish Sign Language (FinSSL). Not until 2015 did Finland get a Sign Language Act (SLA, 359/2015). As the LA, the SLA declares that “authorities must promote in their activities the opportunity for sign language users to use their own language and receive information in their own language”. To enable the legal rights concerning PSIT, there are translators and interpreters specialized in translating and interpreting into and from Swedish, Finnish and the two sign languages. Spoken Swedish and FinSSL exist in the same national frame, they are languages of minority groups, and are regulated by law. However, the two languages have very different status and visibility in society, they differ in institutionality and the legal rights are put into practice in very different ways, partly because spoken Swedish is an official language but FinSSL is not.

We will discuss the legislative status of (spoken) Swedish and Finland-Swedish Sign Language in Finland and how legal rights are implemented in practice. We will do this from the perspective of the translators’ and interpreters’ *agency*, following the definition of *agency* given in Kinnunen & Koskinen (2010) as a “willingness and ability to act”. Our focus is on *access*, *setting* and *participants’ position and roles* (van Dijk’s 1998). Besides the language acts, our material consists of discussions with Finland-Swedish Sign Language interpreters and Swedish translators in different PSIT. We will also draw on one of the presenter’s own experiences as Finland-Swedish Sign Language interpreter.

## References

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