Ildikó Tamás

Identity, Bilingualism, Minority Status Sámi young people on Instagram

In this study, I will analyse a selected topic by examining two Sámi Instagram profiles. Both social network profiles specialise in memes, with a focus exclusively on Sámis. Nevertheless, they also target a wider audience with their messages. This is also represented in using at least two, but in some cases three languages simultaneously, as well as in the translations and explanations posted together with the images. I will examine the question of how an emblematic element of the Sámi identity is transformed from offline discourses into online folklore, and how younger generations use the essential cultural elements that define their identity in social media.

I have chosen two Instagram profiles, *@samiskmeme* and *@saamiresiliencememes* as the subject of my study, focusing on their linguistic and folkloristic aspects. Even the names of the profiles refer to the topic of Sámis and the way they process and publish their content. The *@samiskmeme* profile covers a broader range of topics, while *@saamiresiliencememes* is more coherent in terms of the message they would like to convey: they post mostly political content, defending the rights of indigenous Sámis and building an openly activist profile. Nevertheless, there is a significant overlap in the material of the two sites in terms of the schemes used. The number of active visitors to the profiles (based on likes) is around 200 in both cases; nevertheless, there are also posts with more than 400 likes. The commenting activity is much lower. The number of comments rarely exceeds ten, and most of them tend to contain only emoticons or tag other profiles.

I followed both profiles for 6 months, archiving published content in separate folders and creating thematic and formal subfolders for posts with common characteristics. Thus, I could systematically store clearly distinguishable and correlating variants. However, typology is secondary to the research question in the present study; I mainly conducted a contextual analysis. I saved full-screen photos in my own archives, which include the date of publication, the number of likes at the time of saving, captions, comments and hashtags (in part or in full, depending on their volume).

I paid special attention to the overlaps in content and format between the two profiles, which are also kept in separate folders. Such posts can be seen as variants of each other, which the following two examples illustrate well:



Pictures I and 2 are internationally used templates, and several versions of them are also well-known in Hungary. The first example conveys a political message: it refers to the conflict between the Sámis and the so-called "colonisers." The superficial, homogenising view of outsiders is compared with local cultural diversity. The oppositions of one versus many, foreign versus own are expressed in the use of names. The generic and foreign geographical name Lapland, which contains the pejorative connotation of the word *Lapp*, contrasts with the names of the area inhabited by the Sámis, listed using various Sámi idioms. In Picture 2, the distinction between the forms of the Nordic-Sámi verb leat: dual first person (letne 'we are two') and plural first person (leat 'we - are more than - two'), becomes a representation of the couple's fidelity. One wonders whether the grammatically incorrect form mii *letnet* (instead of the correct *moai letne*) is a mere mistake of the author, or a reference to the Sámi-stranger opposition.¹ The latter meaning horizon is supported by a number of other Instagram profile posts about a foreigner's inability to master the Sámi language. In addition, the insufficient knowledge of the native language of the Sámis and the current changes in the Sámi language are also often expressed as complaints in the post. Sámi was considered a stigmatized language until the last third of the 20th century; as a result, it could skip even generations. This leads to the absurd situation that only the youngest are proficient in their mother tongue in many Sámi families, as they are now free to learn and practice it as a result of the Sámi revitalisation. Older people, even if they know the Sámi language, cannot always use it in writing, and the meme as a form of communication is more common in younger age groups.

¹ Posts on the internet tend to omit or neglect linguistic standards. This is not only true for the Sámis, as the international material is very similar in this respect. Online verbal content is much closer to everyday, verbal communication, and mistakes in language, different spellings, changes in segmentation are in some cases a means of wordplay that can add extra meaning to the message.

Both sites studied include internationally used templates as well as specific Sámi templates, which may represent specific cultural phenomena (handicrafts, costumes, etc.) or contemporary Sámi films, photos or drawings of public figures, animations, etc. Here are two examples presented for each type. Picture 3 depicts the elementary problems of the indigenous people and illustrates one of the fundamental roles of the Sámi memes. They are another means of expressing a common destiny, encouraging unity, standing up together for their rights, and protesting at the same time. Everything has forerunners and parallels. One example is the poster campaigns of Suobpanterror,² an activist group that uses visual art to convey political messages, which are repeatedly displayed offline and online. Colonialism continues to be one of the most common themes, and one that appears in many different ways in Sámi online profiles. Picture 4 is one of the iconic frames from The Sound of Music (1965), often used as a meme template, creatively transformed into a Sámi content. The Sámi text translates as "I'm finally at my summer accommodation." Of course, the message is only understood by those who are familiar with the cyclical nomadism of the Sámis' reindeer-husbandry lifestyle, the tradition of periodic moves between winter and summer accommodation. One of my examples in Pictures 5 and 6 is a scene from a film directed by Nils Gaup and screened for Hungarian audiences under the title Ofelas "Pathfinder" (1987), with the main character set in a completely different context, and the other is a Sámi shaman (quite precisely, this is one of the most famous shamanic depictions from historical sources³). The combination of the shamanic drum – as an authentic and emblematic Sámi object - with a motif that is similar in form but still foreign, and illustrates globalisation at the same time, is a good example how memes achieve a humorous effect by evoking unusual and unexpected associations. The translation of the Sámi text is: "when you need to see into another world/dimension [in a sacred sense] but you are very hungry."4 These two memes use the internationally widespread "When..." formula.5

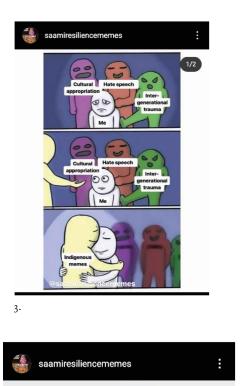
The creativity in the way it is portrayed and the punchline or humour it generates is the element that helps to convey the message, and makes the meme stand out from the simple form of sharing your opinion on the internet. The message is always at the centre of the memes, and the recurring images and texts are the "composition" or "presentation" of this message. The message, as well as the motifs, formulas,

² *Suobpanterror* ("lasso terror") is an activist group of Sámi artists founded in 2012. For more details, see facebook.com/suohpanterror.

³ Knud LEEM: Beskrivelse over Finnmarkens Lapper, deres Tungemaal, Levemaade og forrige afgudsdyrkelse, Copenhagen, 1767.

⁴ Note: the illative form of *geasseorobat* "summer accommodation" in the first text should be *geasseorobabkii*.

⁵ The latter type is characterised by the fact that they are based on typical phenomena (e.g. facial expression, posture, location) which are easy to present along with the emotions they convey. A statement or "typical" situation is assigned to the attitude represented by these facial expressions. The constant formulaic element of verbal content is the "when/but" introduction.



WHEN THE PRIDE MONTH HAS ALREADY BEGUN BUT YOU Haven't even started sewing your glitter discoball gákti yet

saamiresiliencemem

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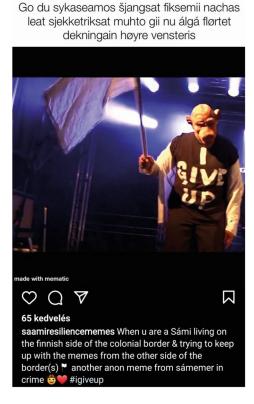
and clichés mobilised, are part of a wider intertextual discourse that transcends the online register. This is why only those who are "in context" are able to decode the message. They know the language, be it abbreviations or other codes of online social communication, the source of the images used (e.g. when using an image from a film, the specific scene or even the whole film as an interpretative context is very important to understand the additional meanings). Knowledge of memes of a similar format may also be relevant, as well as knowledge of the social and cultural events which the content reflects. There are, of course, different levels of interpretation, but the indirect meanings are only revealed to those who are insiders and familiar with the same discourses. However, memes are not (in most cases) made for a narrow audience, i.e. they are not based on specific knowledge of a small community. This is why we also find memes in English on the online platforms I studied.

In the case of the memes presented in my study, the intention to communicate to as wide an audience as possible, and to those of other nationalities living in contact with them, or even to a wider audience is often evident. Mutual translations of the subtitles (English, Norwegian, and Sami) can be found below the pictures (sometimes the same meme is published in several languages), and comments are also provided to help understanding. At the same time, just as there are meaning horizons that are only accessible to a particular ethnicity or other community (e.g. a fan community), we can observe meaning horizons on the sites I follow that are only accessible to users who are familiar with internal discourses. In this respect, there are significant caesuras not only between the Sámis and non-Sámis, but also between different Sámi communities, as illustrated by the following example, which proba-

bly refers to two Norwegian songs, and through them the difficulties of understanding each other, and even the complete abandonment of communication.⁶ (The English translation helps to render intelligible the captions using Sámi and Norwegian languages or Norwegian words with Sámi suffixes):

From the memes I examined, I chose examples that can be placed in the context of the wider Sámi culture. In this study, due to space limitations, I present a single thematic group, an important element of the Sámi identity: cold tolerance, which is a dominant, often thematized segment of the us-versusthem opposition.

Creative adaptation to extreme cold is a cornerstone of the Sámis' specialised culture. Thermal insulation (be it in houses, tents, or clothing) was provided in the past with locally available materi-



⁶ Gábor Tillinger helped me with the interpretation of the meme in Norwegian. Thank you, Gábor!

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als from the natural environment, and many continue to do so.7 This is repeatedly reflected in everyday communication, media, and traditional folklore, often in contexts where the authentic, cold-tolerant Nordic is represented by the Sámis, and the "southern" population, helpless in the face of a harsh climate, by Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, etc. For example, they often make fun of inappropriate clothing, especially the thin, "trashy" footwear worn by non-Sámis, or vice versa, the fact that "Southerners" are cold even in their high-tech gear, while the Sámis are not in their simple, traditional clothing. This motif is also known from Sámi fairy tales and lore, and appears in stories about the Stállo, a relative of the silly devil type figure (ATU 1000-11698). The Stállo is a central figure in the folklore of the Sámis, and his figure is surrounded by many beliefs. They mostly appear in male form, alone or with their dogs, although in some areas whole Stállo families are known, so female and child Stállos also appear.9 The children are usually unnamed, but the Stállo wife has a single name: Njannja. Some respondents to the folklore texts collected in the first half of the 20th century even claimed to know of families related to the Stállos.¹⁰ Marriages to beings from the supernatural sphere naturally reflect attitudes to mixed marriages. The stereotype that the Stállos are violent also helps to link the stories of the Stállo as a mythical creature with real people (outsiders, foreigners, settlers, etc.).¹¹ Violence and cruelty are prominent features of the Stállo.

In fairy tales and folktales, the life of the Stállo is most often ended by freezing to death, e.g. while chasing the mythical Sámi tale/lore hero, he freezes to death due to his lack of suitable clothing. The following memes depict a lack of tolerance to cold (e.g. in the case of Norwegians, or "Westerners" in general), while cold tolerance is praised as a special Sámi gift, of course in a humorous way typical of memes. Translations of the following Sámi memes and captions: "Westerner/Norwegian: Why aren't the Sámis cold? The Sámis: That's a secret" (Picture 8); "Westerners/Norwegians when the temperature drops below 15°C cold" (Picture 10).

Being prepared for the cold, or the lack of it, is also reflected in the interpretation of political and cultural events, whether in official media reports or in oral stories. One of the best-known examples of this was the highly publicised visit of Crown Prince Haakon of Norway and his wife Mette-Marit to Kautokeino in February 2009. During their stay in the north, the idea of sleeping in a tent came up, though Mette-Marit did not dare to sleep in there due to the -30 to -35°C cold. Although the press coverage of the event was positive (on the whole), some forums criticised the fact that the royal couple wore overalls under the winter outfit they received as

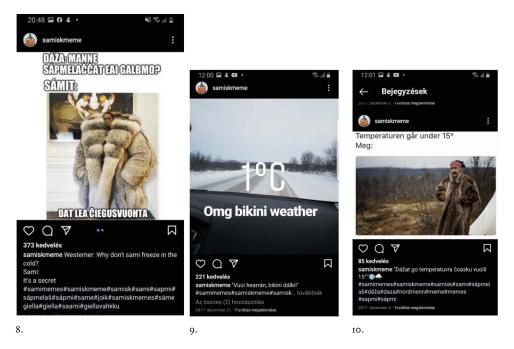
⁷ Sigga-Marja MAGGA: "The Process of creating Sámi handicraft Duodji: From national symbol to norm and resistance". In Mantila, H. – Sivonen, J. – Brunni, S. – Leinonen, K. – Palviainen, S. (eds.): *Congressus Duodecimus Internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum*, Oulu, University of Oulu, 2015, 448–449.

⁸ ATU: international storybook index.

⁹ TAMÁS Ildikó: "Szajvók, sztálló és társaik". *Napút*, 2004/8, 13–20.

¹⁰ Johan Turi: *A lappok élete*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1983, 219.

¹¹ Augus V. KOSKIMIES – Toivo I. ITKONEN: Inari Sámi Folklore: Stories from Aanaar, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2019, 87–88.



a gift from the Sámis. The refusal to stay in a tent and the fact that they wore overalls revived the old motif, well known from early ethnographic collections, that only the Sámis can tolerate the cold.

Of course, in the case of the memes analysed, it is not only this motif, which originated in the long past and has been transferred from the verbal to the online register, that appears in connection with cold tolerance. The following examples illustrate an internationally widespread stereotype of overdressing (wearing an unreasonable and ridiculous amount of clothes), which is completely separable from the exclusively ethnic content, that mothers and grandmothers protect their children and grandchildren from the cold. In this case, self-irony is also expressed, as traditional winter wear is greatly exaggerated (Picture 11). Translation of the caption: "When it's cold outside and your mum dresses you." In addition to the Sámi meme, I present two examples with Hungarian captions to demonstrate the international spread of the topic.

Although the visual component conveying the message has been primarily the clothing in the examples given so far, we also find different formulations. The meme with the caption "bikini weather" (Picture 9) presented above serves as a transition, since only the text refers to one type of clothing, the picture itself puts the emphasis elsewhere. The example below goes in a completely different direction from the topic of dressing up in warm clothes. It shows driving in a snowstorm – which is dangerous and annoying for others – from the non-Sámis' (top picture) and the Sámis' (bottom picture) perspective. It also uses a very common basic theme,





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the iconic films of the Star Wars universe (in this case, the light-speed switch scene), which appears in many memes.

In communication that evokes the dimension of tales and films, the dislocation of danger or problem into the world of fantasy is usually an important element. Going far beyond creative formation or pure humour, these memes also have the function of shaping community reactions, values and "channelling" certain themes into everyday communication. The creators, sharers, and contributors of the social content analysed also act as the vernacular authority - guiding and shaping the discourse -, of which they are well aware. Their active participation counters and balances the intentions of



the "central (power) actors." The comments often express harsh social criticism. As far as formal features are concerned, new and traditional elements usually appear in combination with each other (e.g. an older pattern is filled with topical content, a familiar motif is given a new meaning, or a new motif is introduced into a familiar context), thus linking familiar with unusual elements. The most common way to do this is to transpose the scenes and heroes of a cartoon or a film into a current situation or a field of meaning that people are currently concerned with. The combination of a familiar form and novel, topical content creates the basic situation for a punchline, humour, or even harsh criticism.

Among the tools of understanding the message and orienting the meaning, the above examples highlight the use of multilingualism, i.e. translations or direct multilingualism (see Picture 1).¹² The Nordic-Sámis are present in most entries, either as a textual component of the meme or as a caption (if English or another language appears in the meme), and for those unfamiliar with the Sámi language, English and Norwegian translations are provided to help decode the message. The use of internationally popular meme clichés, such as well-known actors, film scenes or public figures, as part of the visual content is suitable for addressing a wider audience, but a fair number of specific, ethnic motifs, such as traditional numerical objects and symbols, also appear.

Humour should also be mentioned as an important stylistic element in widespread online communication. In the case of the memes I analysed, humour also carries a value judgement: it combines the what-whom opposition with the good/productive vs. bad/unproductive opposition. Humorous content acts as a kind of valve. It formulates the otherwise unspeakable things (according to current PC rules, they can only be formulated with codes) by dramatizing them, putting into a different discursive dimension (thereby legitimising) issues that would otherwise be offensive, shocking, or otherwise unacceptable in their usual context.

Finally, it is worth analysing the content in the light of national identity building. The representation of the interests and political unification of the culturally very diverse Sámi groups living in several countries took place in the first half of the 20th century and can be traced back to a few decades, not counting more isolated initiatives. The establishment of the Sámi parliaments in the last two decades of the last century is a sign of the success of the revitalisation process that took off in the second half of the 1960s, but indigenous national minorities without statehood continue to face many problems. One positive outcome of the assimilation policy¹³ - which became increasingly prevalent in the Nordic countries from the end of the 19th century onwards – was that the Sámis acquired the discourses and skills of power that were essential for asserting their rights later on.¹⁴ Despite their adherence to the traditional attributes of "being Sámi," the Sámis are open to accepting the changes that modernisation brings, as long as these do not threaten their own identity and national interests. They have taken advantage of radio, television, and then the internet as modern communication channels from the beginning, and, following their current social media activity, they continue to use online platforms to serve their own interests. The vast geographical distances, the borders separating them, and their small populations make communication channels particularly important. To preserve their identity, they continue to focus on the motifs and

¹² "Lapland" as opposed to linguistically diverse names.

¹³ Harald EIDHEIM: "When Ethnic Identity is a Social Stigma". In Fredrik Barth (ed.): *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference,* Bergen, Universitetsforlaget, 1969, 39–57.

¹⁴ Henry MINDE: "Assimilation of the Sami: Implementation and Consequences". *Gáldu čála: Journal of Indigenous Peoples Rights*, 2005/3.

symbols that the intellectuals who envisioned and initiated the revitalisation in the second half of the last century selected from traditional Sámi culture (including folklore).¹⁵ These contents, rooted in Sámi folklore and identity discourse, easily found their way into the world of memes, while remaining part of offline folklore.

Through the memes presented in the study, I illustrated that folklore – which for a long time existed only in the oral world – easily conquers newer registers, and even in the most modern forms of communication and in a changed social environment, the motifs and meanings that embody the essentials of Sámi culture continue to live on, such as the cultural and technical specialisation adapted to the harsh Arctic landscape and weather, which evokes a sense of wonder in outsiders and pride in the Sámis.¹⁶ Adaptation is the key to survival for peoples living in extreme natural conditions. This is not only reflected in the use of new technical achievements, but also in the preservation of continuity and the successful combination of old and new, as exemplified by the successful expansion of the Sámi folklore in a new online medium.

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¹⁵ For more, see Ivar BJØRKLUND: Sápmi – nášuvdna riegáda, Tromsø, Tromssa Musea, Tromssa Universiteahta, 2000; TAMÁS Ildikó: "A sarki fény színei: Szimbólumok a számi nemzeti identitáskonstrukció folyamatában". *Ethno-Lore*, 32, 2015, 415–446; Else Grete BRODERSTAD: "The promises and challenges of indigenous self-determination". *International Journal*, 66/4, 2011, 893–907.

¹⁶ Stein R. MATHISEN: "Hegemonic Representations of Sámi Culture: From Narratives of Noble Savages to Discourses on Ecological Sámi". In: Anna-Leena Siikala – Barbro Klein – Stein R. Mathisen, S. R. (eds.): *Creating Diversities: Folklore, Religion and the Politics of Heritage,* Helsinki, Finnish Literature Society, 2004, 53072.

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the process how folklore phenomena and bilingualism find their way to the online sphere. The author bases her study on an exact time frame of some Sámi web-domains and gives an online ethnographical discussion of the Sámi ethnic discourse. She chose a topic for this in-depth analysis – the emblematic relation between indigenous people who get used to the frozen arctic winter and the outlanders who did not. This opposition gives ground for many jokes, argumentations, and statements that sometimes cross the border of the politically correct style. This study also proves that the border between online and offline folklore is far from being a strict one, and we must consider both as parts of the folklore of Sámi ethnic identity.

Keywords: Sámi, indigenous, ethnic identity, bilingualism, folklore, online-offline.

Identitás, kétnyelvűség, kisebbségi lét: Számi fiatalok az Instagramon Rezümé

Tanulmányomban azt a kérdést vizsgálom, hogy a számi identitás egyik emblematikus eleme hogyan transz formálódik az offline diskurzusokból az online folklórba, illetve a fiatalabb nemzedékek hogyan használják fel az identitásukat meghatározó kulturális elemeket, a szóbeliségben is meglévő kétnyelvűséget a közösségi médiában. A vizsgálat két számi Instagram profil adott időkeretben megjelent tartalmaira fókuszál, a szerző az ezekben megjelenő etnikai diskurzus online etnográfiai tárgyalását adja. Az Instagram posztok tematikájában megjelenik a fagyos sarkvidéki télbez, illetve a hidegbez viszonyulás, ami mint biológiai és kulturális jelenség, alkalmasnak bizonyul az etnikai különbségek kommunikálására az őslakosok és az "idegenek" között. Ez az ellentét számos viccnek és egyéb humoros tartalomnak ad teret, amelyek néba átlépik a politikailag korrekt stílus batárát. A tanulmányban bemutatott mémeken keresztül illusztrálom, hogy a sokáig csak a szóbeliségben létezett folklór könnyedén megbódítja az újabb regisztereket, és még a legmodernebb közlésformákban, megváltozott társadalmi környezetben is tovább élnek a számi kultúrát esszenciálisan megtestesítő motívumok és jelentések.

Kulcsszavak: számi, őslakos, etnikus identitás, kétnyelvűség, folklór, online-offline