

Language Act

(148/1922, amendments up to 201/1996 included)

1. General provisions

Section 1 (10/1975)

- (1) The national language of Finland, Finnish or Swedish, or both Finnish and Swedish, shall be used before courts and other State authorities, as well as before the authorities of the municipalities, the other autonomous districts and the joint municipal organisations, as provided by this Act. The language or languages used shall be determined on the basis of the language of each administrative district, autonomous district, corresponding community or joint municipal organisation, as well as of the parties to the matter.
- (2) Separate provisions shall be enacted on the right to use the Sami language before the authorities.
(517/1991)

Section 2 (10/1975)

- (1) An administrative district or an autonomous district that comprises only one municipality shall be unilingual, if its entire population uses the same language or if the number of the inhabitants using the other language is less than eight per cent of the total number of inhabitants. The district shall be bilingual if the number of the inhabitants using the other language equals or exceeds the said percentage, or is at least 3000. The same provision shall apply to an administrative district smaller than a municipality.
- (2) An administrative district or an autonomous district that comprises several municipalities, as well as a joint municipal organisation, shall be unilingual if all the member municipalities are unilingual. The language or languages used in each municipality shall be correspondingly used in a district with unilingual member municipalities with different languages or with bilingual member municipalities.
- (3) Every ten years the Council of State shall determine on the basis of the official statistics those administrative districts and autonomous districts that shall be unilingual and those that shall be bilingual in accordance with the provisions above. A bilingual municipality shall not be determined to be unilingual unless the number of the inhabitants using the other language has fallen to six per cent or less of the total.
- (4) For a special reason the Council of State can, on the proposal of the municipal council or also otherwise after having obtained an opinion from the municipality, determine a municipality to be bilingual for the following ten-year period, even if it would be unilingual according to the provisions

above in this section.

- (5) When the boundaries of administrative districts or autonomous districts are changed, the languages of the new districts shall at the same time be determined in accordance with the provisions of paragraphs (1)—(4). Also in this situation the Council of State shall have the right referred to in paragraph (4).

2. *Language of the Parties to a Matter and Language of Official Documents*

Section 3

- (1) The language of the district or one of the languages of a bilingual district shall be used before a court and another State authority. However, a Finnish citizen shall have the right to use his/her own language, Finnish or Swedish, in a matter to which he/she is a party and in a matter in which he/she is being heard. Also, a municipality and another autonomous community, a joint municipal organisation, a religious community, a Finnish association, a cooperative, a company, a partnership, a foundation and an institution shall have the right to use the language in which its minutes are kept and an educational institution its language of instruction. (10/1975)
- (2) If a document submitted to a court or to another State authority has been written, contrary to the provisions of paragraph (1), in the other national language, the authority shall obtain a valid translation at the expense of the submitting party. However, the authority shall obtain the translation at its own expense, if it is to see to the interpretation in the matter in accordance with section 22 of the Administrative Procedure Act (598/1982). (599/1982)

Section 4

- (1) When a State attorney, a public prosecutor or another State official is pursuing an action as a part of his/her official duties, he/she shall use the language of the defendant, if he/she is required to know this language.
- (2) If necessary, interpretation shall be resorted to in an oral hearing of a matter before a court or when a matter is considered by the police.

Section 5 (141/1935)

- (1) In a unilingual administrative district a court and another authority shall issue its documents in the language of the district.
- (2) However, the Council of State, a Ministry, a central administrative board, a court and a County Government shall be obliged to append a valid translation to its documents if the original document should according to section 6 be issued in the other language and a party in question, who according

to section 3 has the right to use the language other than that used in the administrative district, has requested a translation.

Section 6 (141/1935)

- (1) In a bilingual administrative district a court and another authority shall issue its documents in the language of the party or the parties in question or in the language agreed on by the parties.
- (2) If the parties have used different languages and they do not agree on the document language, the following provisions shall apply:
 - (1) In a criminal matter the language of the defendant shall be used.
 - (2) In another matter and in a criminal matter with defendants using different languages the language of the majority of the population of the administrative district shall be used, unless the authority, with regard to the rights and interests of the parties, decides otherwise.

Section 7

Before municipal authorities and the authorities of the other autonomous districts the language or, if the district is bilingual, one of the languages of the district shall be used. The provisions of section 5(1) and section 6 shall also apply with regard to these authorities.

Section 8

- (1) A higher court and another higher authority shall in each case issue its documents in the language used, in accordance with this Act, by the lower authority concerned.
- (2) A party in question who according to section 5(2) has the right to request that a valid translation be appended to a document shall have the same right with regard to the documents of a higher court and a higher authority.

Section 9 (141/1935)

If a unilingual municipality or other autonomous community is officially requested to issue an opinion or to give an explanation in a matter in which the language other than that of the municipality or community is used, an officially certified translation of the documents shall be sent to the municipality or community by the authority concerned. The same provision shall apply to a document issued in such a matter.

Section 10 (141/1935)

- (1) Announcements, notifications, proclamations and other comparable documents issued *ex officio* by a court, another State authority or an authority of a municipality or another autonomous district and intended for public notice shall in an unilingual administrative district or autonomous district be written in the language of the district and in a bilingual administrative district or autonomous district in both national languages.
- (2) The official notices and proclamations issued in a bilingual district by a District Court, a judge, a County Government, a State Local Office, a department or a branch office of a State Local Office or an official of one of the above and relating to the rights of a private individual may at discretion be drawn up only in the language of the majority of the population, unless otherwise requested by the petitioner. (201/1996)

3. *The Internal Language of Public Authorities*

Section 11

- (1) A court and another State authority in a unilingual administrative district shall use the language of the district in its internal affairs.
- (2) In this Act the internal language of public authorities means the language used in such minutes and other documents that are not to be given to a private party in question, in the correspondence between authorities and in official accounting.

Section 12 (10/1975)

A court and another State authority in a bilingual administrative district or exercising jurisdiction over bilingual municipalities or unilingual municipalities with different languages shall use the language of the majority of the administrative district in its internal affairs. However, in a matter where the documents are to be issued in the language of the minority the language of the documents shall be used, unless there are special reasons for using the language of the majority. If a language other than that of the documents has been used, a valid translation of the documents relating to the matter shall without delay be appended to the documents, if a party in question so requests. This provision shall not apply to documents obviously irrelevant to the decision in the matter.

Section 13 (141/1935)

- (1) In a matter where documents are to be issued a higher authority shall communicate with a lower authority in the language that the latter is to use in accordance with section 12 and with an unilingual municipality or other autonomous district and their authorities in the language of the municipality or district. (10/1975)

- (2) Regardless of the provision of paragraph (1) a lower authority may not refrain from complying with an order issued in the other language, if the authority is required to know this language.

Section 14

- (1) An authority whose activities concern only one language group shall use the language of this group.
- (2) The administrative organs and officials of unilingual education and instruction institutions of the State or a municipality shall also use the language of the institution even if it is located in a municipality using the other language.

Section 15

- (1) The provisions of sections 11, 12 and 14 shall apply also to the authorities of municipalities and other autonomous districts. In addition, in bilingual districts these authorities shall comply with the provision of section 13(1) in their correspondence with authorities subordinate to them.
- (2) However, in a matter where the documents are to be issued in the language of the minority of the municipality, a valid translation shall without delay be appended to the minutes of the municipal authority, if a party in question or a member of the municipality so requests. (10/1975)
- (3) Also, the provision in paragraph (1) shall not preclude the right of the council of an autonomous district to decide that the minutes be kept in both languages.

Section 16 (141/1935)

- (1) A member of a collegiate body with jurisdiction over a bilingual administrative district, bilingual municipalities or unilingual municipalities with different languages shall in discussions and in opinions to be entered in the minutes have the right to use the language, Finnish or Swedish, he/she deems appropriate.
- (2) The members of the councils of autonomous districts and the members of general committees and boards shall have the same right. If a member of a council does not understand a statement given in the other language, it shall be briefly interpreted to him/her, if he/she so requests.

4. *Miscellaneous Provisions*

Section 17 (141/1935)

- (1) The provisions of this Act on the language of State authorities shall apply also to the language of the parties to a matter, the language of official documents and the language used within the administration in the Cathedral Chapters, Vicar's offices and other authorities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, unless the matter by its nature is to be deemed an internal matter of the Church under the Church Act. The provisions on municipalities and other autonomous communities shall apply correspondingly to the parishes of this Church. Also, parishes formed on the basis of language shall remain unilingual regardless of the language of the people of the district.
- (2) Provisions on the official language of the Greek Orthodox Church shall be issued by Decree.

Section 17 a (10/1975)

The provisions of this Act on the language of municipal authorities shall apply also to the language of the parties to a matter, the language of official documents and the language used within the administration in the authorities of joint municipal organisations.

Section 17 b (368/1995)

A State enterprise and a service-providing company controlled by the State or one or more bilingual municipalities or several unilingual municipalities with different languages shall serve the public and provide information both in Finnish and in Swedish, unless this is unnecessary or, when assessed as a whole, unreasonable from the point of view of the company.

Section 18 (141/1935)

Separate provisions shall be enacted on the official language of the authorities of State Universities and institutions of higher education and on the language used in instruction and examinations there.

Section 19

- (1) This Act shall apply to military authorities. Their administrative districts shall be deemed unilingual if the rank and file of the units subordinate to them have been assembled in order to set up an unilingual unit, and bilingual if the rank and file have been assembled regardless of mother tongue or if the activities of the authorities concern units of different languages.
- (2) The command language of the Armed Forces shall be Finnish.

Section 20 (141/1935)

- (1) Regardless of the provisions of section 2(2), the State Railway administrative districts shall for the part of each stopping place be deemed to use the language or languages of the stopping place.
- (2) Stopping places are unilingual if the municipalities immediately surrounding them are unilingual, and bilingual if the municipalities immediately surrounding them are bilingual or unilingual with different languages.

Section 21 (10/1975)

The Government bills and reports prepared and published by a Ministry, a State committee, a commission or another corresponding body shall be published in Finnish and, unless especially persuasive reasons otherwise warrant, in full, in part or as a synopsis also in Swedish, as decided by the competent Ministry with regard to the importance of the matter to the Swedish-speaking population and to other circumstances.

Section 22

- (1) The provisions on the authorities in bilingual administrative districts shall apply to Finnish missions abroad. They shall apply also to consulates headed by a career Consul.
- (2) Provisions on the use of a language other than Finnish or Swedish in missions and consulates shall be issued by Decree.

Section 23

- (1) A document issued as a valid translation in accordance with this Act shall be considered equal to the original.
- (2) If a State authority is to give or send a party in question a translation of a document or if internal documents of the authorities are to be translated in accordance with section 12, the costs of the translation shall be covered by the State. The costs arising from the translation referred to in section 15(1) and (2) and the interpretation referred to in section 16(2) shall be covered by the autonomous community or the joint municipal organisation. (10/1975)

Section 24

This Act shall not apply to official correspondence addressed to foreign States or foreign citizens or to documents intended to be used abroad; however, the provisions of sections 5 and 6 shall be complied with also in connection with such documents, unless they are issued in a foreign language or in both national languages.

Section 25

Further provisions on the implementation of this Act shall be issued by Decree.

Section 26

This Act enters into force on 1 January 1923.