

## THE CREATION OF A DYING LANGUAGE

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### INTRODUCTION

At most European borders autochthonous languages overlap. In some cases the standard language of one state is a minority language on the other side of the boundary, with less or no protection compared to the standardized language of the neighboring state (Lundén 2009). In such situations there is a tendency for the dialect to develop into a *wild dialect* (Kloss 1952), also called a *dachlose Mundart*. In recent years, there is a policy by local proponents of such idioms to try to have them recognized as languages.

To the Finnish-speaking population of north-eastern Sweden, hundred years of official neglect of the native language created a decreasing command of standard Finnish, while at the same time Finnish in Finland has developed into a modern, technologically and semantically expressive idiom. The geo-linguistic situation of northern Sweden is complicated, with three major linguistic groups, Finnish, Sami and Swedish, two of which are further divided into subgroups, which in some cases would motivate a further split of official recognition, in other cases a merge of officially differentiated versions of speech. The reason for this seemingly illogical formal situation can be found in the complicated history and social geography of the area.

### THE TORNE VALLEY: A TRUNCATED AREA OF COMMON CULTURE

In 1809, Sweden suddenly lost about one third of its territory. In contrast to the other territories east and south of the Baltic Sea, Finland was an integrated part of Sweden, even if its eastern part was now and then specifically mentioned by name in official letters and regulations (Eng 2001). As the country

had no official language, there was not any regulation of minority languages either. Evidently, Swedish was the language of administration all over the country, but in the Finnish-speaking parts of the country the clergy, the contact persons between the population and the state, almost always spoke the local language. Any sermons or formal education was given in Finnish and there were attempts at a more general bilingualism, for example that Finnish interpretation would be obligatory at official duties in Finnish-speaking areas (Elenius 2001; Hederyd 1992).

The partition of Sweden was particularly painful around the new boundary in the north, especially as the Torne Valley and Torneå<sup>1</sup> were not part of Finland but belonged to the County of Västerbotten in Sweden proper. The boundary should follow the rivers Muonio and Torne to the Gulf of Bothnia, with the notable exception of the Town of Torneå, which was planned to become the capital of the new Swedish province of Norrbotten, but now became the exception from the rule that the main course of the river, called the Royal Artery, would be the Swedish boundary towards the Grand Duchy of Finland.

The lower part of the river valley is broad and fertile, with level banks and islands with good pastures. The earlier parish boundaries crossed the river at almost a right angle, reflecting the fact that the river was a combining factor in the area. The peasants cultivated meadows and fields on both sides of the river (Hederyd 1992).

All official political and cultural administration on the Swedish side was carried out entirely in Swedish, but outside the town limits Finnish was totally dominant, and in reality parish councils and church services were conducted in Finnish (except for the town parish of Nedertorneå where there were services in Swedish certain weeks). In 1868 the parish council of Nedertorneå complained to the King that the state servants often do not know the language of the population, Finnish (Hederyd 1992).

#### EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF FORCED ASSIMILATION

School education reached Swedish part of the Torne Valley late, and for a long time it was regarded self-evident that the urban language was Swedish while the rural schools would teach the native language, Finnish. There were difficulties, however. Peasants resisted sending the children to school and to pay for it, and the recruitment of teachers was another problem (Tenerz 1963; Hederyd 1992).

School textbooks were eventually taken from Finland, and public education started to function. In 1874 a primary school teacher training college was opened in Haparanda, using the Finnish language. But at the same time the evolution started that in the next decade would culminate in a national Swedish campaign

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<sup>1</sup> The Swedish spelling of place names in present Finland was used during the Swedish time irrespective of the local use, and as long as Swedish was the only official language beside Russian in the Great Duchy of Finland.

for the linguistic integration of the country's Finnish-speaking population. At about the same time, in Finland, a campaign started against the swedification. In 1908 the cathedral chapter of Luleå suggested a massive extension of the school system, enacted by Parliament in 1911, and by 1912 the Teacher Training College had totally gone over to Swedish. Finnish was not regarded a merit anymore, and more and more of local education aimed at integrating the Torne Valley population through monolingual Swedish instruction. (Elenius 2001; Slunga 1965; Tenerz 1963). This active swedification process was included in most walks of life. In order to put an end to the smuggling and local export of butter the Association for Rural Economy hired a county dairy inspector, and she also managed to set up a dairy school at Björkfors, on the Swedish language border, where all teaching would be in Swedish. "Finn girls" from the Valley had priority in order to replace dairy maids from Finland (Wahlberg 1996). The attempts to integrate Sweden's Torne Valley into the state territory also included the transport infrastructure. In the beginning of the 20th Century, Parliament accepted a proposal to extend the trunk railway with a line from Boden to the Torne River and Haparanda with arguments more national than economic. The line reached Haparanda in 1915, but the only real influence on the Valley was that all the stations – except Haparanda – were given wrongly or clumsily translated Swedish names (Slunga 1965). The decisive factor for the final swedification of the schools was the report by the *Finnbygdssakkunniga*, the official expert group of the Finnish homestead area of 1919. In spite of one member who spoke in favour of recognition of the role of Finnish in the schools, the majority favoured a totally Swedish language school, and this was also implemented. Several investigations seemed to confirm the will of the population to learn Swedish, and most pedagogues of the time had the opinion that monolingual education was the best way of reaching a better knowledge of Swedish. In the poverty-stricken Torne Valley the idea with "Work Cottages" was accepted, where poor children were removed from their families during the week. The expert report underlined that the cottages used Swedish as a language of communication, thereby making the children accustomed to the language (Tenerz 1963:215ff., Lundén 1966). The *Finnbygdssakkunniga* report coincided with Finland's independence and a Finnish irredenta movement that was partly directed against the swedification of the Finnish-speaking areas of Sweden. This resulted in a Swedish counteraction. From the Swedish side of the river the will to belong to Sweden and to become integrated was strongly emphasised. Among the majority of the local population the Russian revolution and the Civil War in Finland created a fear of contacts with the neighboring country, and this also influenced attitudes towards the native Finnish language. When, in 1932, the Swedish Government suggested voluntary teaching of Finnish in the Finnish-speaking areas this met with heavy resistance from ten out of twelve school boards and the proposal was dismissed (Klockare 1982; Elenius 2001; Tenerz 1963). When the bill was reintroduced in 1935 without hearing with the school boards, two members of Parliament, both from the local area

vehemently opposed the idea. It is evident that local authority persons in the Diocese, County School Board etc. with some exceptions were determinedly Swedish nationalist and that they used their positions in order to counteract any slight recognition of the Finnish language in education and administration (Slunga 1965; Jaakkola 1973).

#### DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In the inter-war period the Torne area was still distant and poor. State actions to combat unemployment functioned against poverty but they were also directed towards ethnic integration. With their large families, people in the Swedish Torne Valley constituted an anomaly in Sweden, and young people had to leave the area for the south of Sweden in order to obtain employment. During the end of World War II, people and cattle from Finland were evacuated to the Swedish side for short periods. Swedish military were stationed along the border, leading to many contacts with the local population and factual integration of the population into the Swedish nation.

While the towns and villages of Northern Finland were bombed and burnt by the retreating Nazi German Army, the Swedish side remained intact. The family structure on the Swedish side eventually became more like the one in the South, while the flight to the south, particularly of women, continued. In Finland this demographic turnover came later, but like on the western riverbank, the emigration was directed towards southern Sweden. During this time there was a seasonal commuting from the eastern riverside to Sweden, young people from Finland helped farmers in summer. Most men returned to Finland, while many young women stayed on and married, replacing those women who left for jobs in Southern Sweden, thus keeping a more standardised version of Finnish alive (Hederyd 1992; Jaakkola 1973).

#### LANGUAGE DEBATE RETURNING

Not until 1957 did the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation introduce a local programme in Finnish, *Pohjoiskalotti*, which became quite popular although met with some local resistance. There were always defenders of the Finnish language, even among educational administrators, e.g. the county educational inspector William Snell, and but on the local level, many teachers advocated a harsh policy towards the use of Finnish at school, even in the breaks. Such measures were forbidden by the National Board of Education 1957, but seem to have been practised even afterwards (Hansegård 1968b:5). However, in the middle of the 1960's the minority language debate was reactivated, and even given some attendance outside of the Nordic area (Galloy 1965; Lundén 1966, 1969). An investigation made on demand from the Swedish Board of Education (Kenttä, Weinz 1968) suggested a rejection of any amount of reintroduction of Finnish, partly based on find-

ings in one (then) recent doctoral thesis of bilingualism by John Macnamara, while totally ignoring the whole canon of multilingualism, which would speak in favour of the use of the native language in education. The Swedish academic linguist Nils Erik Hansegård in a review found the investigation characterised by unreliability and lack in objectivity (Hansegård 1968b:6). Hansegård's own book, *Tvåspråkighet eller halvspråkighet* ("Bilingualism or half-lingualism"), 1968, spurred the debate. His argument, that the lack of consideration of the local language led to linguistic and emotional deficiencies in the minority language population led to an angry debate. Many Tornedalians, especially some local teachers interpreted this as an insult, whereas Hansegård's criticism was directed towards the incompetence of local authorities and the passivity of the Government. In the 1970's, a hundred years after the Swedish political language and national turnover towards monolingualism, and long after it had been abandoned by the Swedish government, this policy had reached its goals. Many young Tornedalians did not speak it and most people who did speak it did not have a formal education in their native language (Haavio-Mannila, Suolinna 1971; Jaakkola 1973). In Finland the majority language had undergone a standardisation and modernisation.

During this time the boundary town of Haparanda experienced an internal migration from Southern Sweden of Finnish speaking people, mostly with their roots in the Finland part of the Torne Valley or in Lapland County, Finland. The town welcomed this influx of population, but the in-migrants' organizations urged for Finnish language services in the schools, day-care centers and in social care. In the Swedish boundary area with its heavy experiences of linguistic indoctrination and a partly negative attitude towards standard Finnish, these demands arouse what might be called defense mechanisms.

In the 1970's came the first signals that certain persons (including some of those who rejected the use of standard Finnish) had begun to see the (Sweden) Torne Valley Finnish as a separate language and not just a dialect. The "language" was given a name, *meänkieli*<sup>2</sup> (our language) and was promoted with support from different cultural funds, grammar, dictionaries and literature (Winsa 2009). But even the studies made by socio-linguists Jaakkola, Haavio-Mannila and Suolinna in the mid-1970's do not mention this name.

#### TOWARDS A RECOGNITION – OF WHAT?

In 1997 a Swedish state investigation published *Steg mot en minoritetspolitik* (*Steps towards a minority policy*), interpreting the Council of Europe's criteria for domestic (autochthonous) minorities and minority languages. In their careful deliberations they ended up with the following minority languages: Sami,

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to write *Meänkieli* with capital letter when it is referred to as a recognized language (i.e. for Sweden after 1999).

Finnish with meänkieli (Torne Valley Finnish), and Romani Chib, the two first languages with a local basis in a number of northern municipalities, where they will get some (rather limited) rights. One member of the scientific committee, professor of education with roots in the area, added an excited reservation, maintaining that meänkieli is a language in its own right and not a dialect, and this was supported by a local political member of the committee (Spiliopoulou Åkermark & Huss 2006).

A Swedish expert on multilingualism, professor Kenneth Hyltenstam, in a special article appended to the investigation, summarised:

The discussion in this chapter therefore cannot be finished with taking a position on the question whether the variety is a language or a dialect (Steg mot en minoritetspolitik 385, *my translation TL*).

A Finlandic expert was also asked to write a evaluation, but refused because of illness and was never replaced.

A Swedish state investigation is sent out for comments to agencies, universities and organizations with relevance to the area in question (Swedish: *remissinstans*). In 1999 the Government Proposition 1998/99:143 is published, proposing, in difference to the Investigation suggestion, making *Sami, Finnish and Meänkieli* minority languages with a “historical geographical base, which implies demands for more far-reaching measures for the support of these languages (Proposition 1998/99:143, p.1). According the Swedish Law Council the consequence will be that Meänkieli and Finnish are to be regarded as different languages, while Sami will be seen as one, in spite of the fact that it is divided into a number of mutually unintelligible “dialects”.

Why did the government change the suggestion by the majority of the committee? The motivation will be seen on page 31:

Several consulted bodies (*remissinstanser*) have expressed concern about the Committee’s proposal to treat Meänkieli as a variant of Finnish. They believe that the proposal might create an asymmetrical relation between standard Finnish and Meänkieli.

A number of bodies expressing this are mentioned, including Stockholm and Uppsala Universities.

This reference in the text is slightly misleading. Stockholm University never gave an evaluation, instead four different departments sent in their views. Only one of these departments, professor Hyltenstam’s, supported the idea of splitting, not even the Department of Finno-Ugric languages. Looking at the other bodies suggesting a split, there is a strong connection to a small number of activists, some of which were active in the same direction in the investigation committee.

In December, 1999, the Swedish Parliament accepted parts of a Council of Europe convention on minorities and minority languages. In the language category were placed Sami, Finnish, Torne Valley Finnish (Meänkieli), Romani

Chib, and Yiddish, the three first with special historical and geographical rights in five Norrbotten municipalities; Gällivare, Haparanda, Kiruna, Pajala and Övertorneå. The paragraphs accepted give linguistic minorities certain limited rights to protection (Spiliopoulou Åkermark, Huss 2006). The selection of languages, the definition of a language and the interpretation of historical ‘autochthony’ (the fact that the language has been carried on from generation to generation in the same area for more than 100 years) has been heavily criticised by linguists and social scientists (e.g. by Hansegård (Hansegård 2000:173) who judged meänkieli as a dialect of Finnish) but vehemently defended by a number of Meänkieli activists (see e.g. Hyltenstam 1999). One of the strongest arguments for the language interpretation is the fact that words, books and programs are being produced in the version, whereas the critics, among them members of the Swedish language council, Finlantic cultural diplomats and others privately point at the fact that this is a circular evidence and that the division into two standard languages will make cross-border contacts more difficult. The criticism from Finland has never been made formally, in the belief that this would be seen as a ‘foreign intervention’ into this sensitive issue.

The Torne Valley linguistic situation is complicated: In the Finland side of the valley a dialect, *tornion murre*, also called meänkieli is spoken but growing closer to standard Finnish. On the Swedish side, apart from the Sami language spoken in the far north of the valley, there is a use of three recognized languages,

- (1) Swedish, by most Sweden-born adult inhabitants of Haparanda plus by most young Sweden-born in other places
- (2) Torne Valley Finnish (Meänkieli/meänkieli), which is in Finland a local dialect ‘spoken mostly by old men’ (Jaakkola 1973:85), but in Sweden the remnants of the same dialect but with an increasing immersion of Swedish words, turned into a formal language with an activist production of words, mostly of Swedish origin and thus distancing itself from both Finland meänkieli and standard Finnish (Vaattovaara 2009).
- (3) Standard Finnish is spoken by immigrant Finns and their children.

#### LANGUAGE USE AND ATTITUDES

In the boundary towns the individual mobility across the boundary is very varying. While the long-time resident population on each side usually do not understand the other language, the rural internal migrants from Sweden’s Torne Valley and Finnish in-migrants from Southern Sweden usually have some competence in both languages. While almost all Finnish speakers on both sides are positive to the “neighbouring people”, monolingual Swedes are to some extent negative (Zalamans 2006; Zalamans 2002). While Haparanda and Tornio are in a successful co-operation the relationships further north along the bound-

ary seem more problematic. The work of the Torne Valley Council has been rather unsuccessful, and so has bi-lateral co-operation with some exceptions. One reason might be the language situation; another would be the internal problems of each entity and the fixation towards support from the respective state governments. In the border municipality of Pajala, Sweden, a suggestion in July 2002 to let the few school children from Muodoslompolo village attend the school of Muonio, Finland, 15 kilometers away rather than the nearest school in Sweden, 80 kilometers away was met with very heavy resistance from the parents. A recent project aims at opening opencast iron mining in the Swedish municipality of Pajala, to be connected by a railway (Finnish gauge) across the boundary river to the Finnish municipality for further refinement. This will strengthen the cultural contacts across the river (Winsa 2009:122). But the old linguistic affinity is declining, and more and more of negotiations and meetings are to be held with interpreters or in school English.<sup>3</sup>

Meänkieli is particularly fostered by a group of activists in Övertorneå and Pajala, in Haparanda the standard version of Finnish totally dominant together with Swedish, partly as a result of an influx of population native from the Finland side. In the border towns of Haparanda and Tornio the repartition of ethnicity, citizenship and linguistic competence was according to a statistical survey on 1999 as follows:

	Haparanda			Tornio		
Citizenship	S 72%	F 27%		F 98%		
Ethnicity	S 58%	F 39%		F 96%		
Language (fluent, good)	S 80%	F 64%	M 24%	F 90%	S 20%	M 22%

(S= Swedish, F= Finnish, M= Meänkieli) (Zalamans 2002:37ff.)<sup>4</sup>

#### LANGUAGE IN THE SCHOOLS

An investigation from 2003 by Zalamans<sup>5</sup> of pupils in four classes each in Haparanda and Tornio schools show that (in these schools, not necessarily representative for the whole age groups), about 65% in Haparanda and 50% in Tornio had a sufficient knowledge of the language of the “other side”, a reflection of large number of immigrant parents from Finland, and the status of Swed-

<sup>3</sup> Municipal councillor Bengt Niska, interview, September 2, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Ethnicity is the self-description of “belonging to a people”. As the ethnicity “Finn” was for a long time a derogatory ascription in Swedish Torne Valley, it can be assumed that most local people from the Swedish side prefer to see themselves as Swedes. Concerning Meänkieli there is a rather high understanding even on the Finland side (even higher than in Sweden if a medium understanding is included), probably depending on the fact that meänkieli in Finland is the old dialect spoken locally without influence from Swedish.

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished paper.



ish as mandatory school language in Finland. There is however a strong difference between the situation in Haparanda and the rest of the (Swedish) Torne Valley. In Haparanda standard Finnish is almost dominant, certainly with Swedish as a mandatory language of education and administration, but Meänkieli is weak. But even in the two other border municipalities the educational situation differs. The negative attitude to using the local language in the schools has disappeared or been turned into its opposite, unfortunately at the same time as the pupils' knowledge of the language has decreased or ceased. The local newspaper reports that the State School inspection has criticized the Pajala municipal school administration for introduction Meänkieli as a mandatory subject "which is not in consistence with the National Plan of Education" But the pre-school is free to use Meänkieli (*Haparandabladet* Sept.4th, 2009, 8). The local councilor of Pajala Bengt Niska is, however pessimistic about young people's knowledge of any variant of Finnish, English is increasingly used for contacts with Finland.<sup>6</sup> In Övertorneå both Finnish and Meänkieli are individual choices in the High School, but according to the municipal councilor Linda Ylivainio, almost all choose standard Finnish.<sup>7</sup> The Haparanda High School, Tornedalsskolan has only pupils from the municipality itself.

Finnish is studied by a relatively large proportion of pupils, mostly those with Finnish as their home language. Around 70% of the population have a Finnish background. Education is free across the boundary; some pupils with a good command of Finnish choose to continue their high school studies in Finland. Meänkieli has no 'footing' in Haparanda. When I was a pupil at the Tornedalsskolan there was already a possibility to study Finnish, but it had a low status. In the school catalogue all pupils fluent in Finnish had an F. Then it was more 'status' not to have an F. Today pupils see the study of Finnish as an opportunity.<sup>8</sup>

In 1989 the two border cities of Haparanda and Tornio started a common school Språkskolan–Kielikoulu in Haparanda. The school follows the Swedish educational legislation, but the curriculum is a compromise between the two national systems. Half of the pupils come from each of the two towns, and are selected so as to create a truly bilingual situation (which means that immigrant children from Finland living in Haparanda will only be admitted if they have a good command of Swedish<sup>9</sup>).

#### A NEW LANGUAGE – ADDITION OR DIVISION?

It is difficult to make a balanced verdict of the sociolinguistic situation of northeastern Norrbotten, Sweden. Obviously, the command of the local dialect is rapidly declining, in spite of its recognition as a separate language. Pro-

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, September 2, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Municipal councillor Linda Ylivainio in a telephone interview, August 20, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Principal John Waltari, Tornedalsskolan, e-mail, August 7, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with principal Hjördis Lagneback, September 3, 2009.

moters of Meänkieli have been greatly helped financially, leading to the production of dictionaries, books and media. This might have caused some pride among the local population. But the separation from Finnish has its price. Instead of using Meänkieli as way into standard Finnish, the tendency is rather to increase the distance. One leading former member of the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages used the sentence *divide et impera*. The result of Swedish Meänkieli may, as in the case of Pajala, be the increased use of English for cross-boundary contacts. But in any case, the development of Meänkieli may change the old sentence “a language is a dialect with a navy and army” in to “a language is a dialect with a determined lobby group”.

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