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Kristina Malmio

A Strange Romance: Malin Kivelä, *Du eller aldrig* (2006) as a Case Study of Late Modern Multilingualism in Finland-Swedish Minority Literature

Abstract: Multilingualism as a narrative strategy has become more and more frequent in Finland-Swedish minority literature since the 1980s. In this article, I study the use of various foreign languages in a Finland-Swedish novel, *Du eller aldrig*, written by Malin Kivelä, and ask what the reason(s) for this development might be. Using a concept of Yasemin Yildiz, "the paradigm of the mother tongue," I show how the multilingualism of the protagonists deconstructs the assumed homology between language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality. Not only is the novel's use of multilingualism complex and multifaceted, it also creates a rupture in the view according to which Finland-Swedish literature is the carrier of the "voice" of the Swedish minority in Finland. Being an example of postmonolingual literature, the novel includes impurity of language use, offers an enhanced understanding of the linguistic conditions of a minority literature today, and illustrates the late modern developments which have transformed the speaking subjects as well as their linguistic landscapes.

Keywords: Finland-Swedish literature, late modernity, Malin Kivelä, minority literature, monolingual paradigm, multilingual practice, paradigm of the mother tongue, postmonolingual literature

One of the recurrent features of contemporary Finland-Swedish literature is its multilingualism, which is visible in prose literature as well as in poetry. In earlier times, words, phrases, expressions, and utterances from other languages occurred from time to time, but were mostly a marginal phenomenon in prose literature written in Swedish in Finland. During the last thirty years, multilingualism has however become a dominant narrative device. This change has taken place gradually, and can be explained both in terms of literary as well as cultural and social developments. I will here focus on a contemporary Finland-Swedish novel, *Du eller aldrig* [You or Never], written by author Malin Kivelä (b. 1974) and published in 2006. By examining the forms and functions of multilingualism in the novel, I aim to discuss the reasons for the frequent appearance of multilingualism in Finland-Swedish literature, and its relation to phenomena connected to late modernity and to "the

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paradigm of the mother tongue.” This is a concept used by Yasemin Yildiz in her book *Beyond the Mother Tongue* to describe the “exclusive link” between language and identity, “a sense of wholeness, belonging, and affective attachment” (Yildiz 2011, 204–205) connected to the mother tongue. Developed in Europe during the nineteenth century, the mother tongue paradigm, with its assumed homology between language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality (23), is still strong, Yildiz argues, despite the fact that globalization and the remodelling of nation states have started to loosen its hold. She also puts forward that, rather than by multilingualism, the late modern situation is characterized by a *tension* between a monolingual paradigm and multilingual practice (5), a back-and forth movement between these two opposites. *Du eller aldrig* uses multilingualism in a special and illustrative manner; together with its very special treatment of the language in which it is mainly written (Swedish), it offers, I think, an intriguing case of the “paradigm of the mother tongue.” It can perhaps also be seen as an example of post-monolingual Finland-Swedish minority literature. Literature of this phase is, according to Malan Marnersdóttir, characterized by a notion of the impurity of literary language and by the fact that one reads and writes in languages other than one’s mother tongue. What is more, post-monolingual literature can express experiences that might be difficult to describe in the mother tongue (Marnersdóttir 2016).

This will, I hope, result in an enhanced understanding of (some of) the conditions of a minority literature today, and of the developments that have lately taken place. What is of central importance here is the sensitivity of literature to changes that take place in attitudes and ideologies connected to language, and literature’s potential to express these changes not only by discussing the topic but also in a multitude of other ways, not least through style.

1 A change and its reasons

Finland-Swedish literature is a minority literature, written by Swedish-language authors in Finland, where Finnish is the language of the majority. The views put forward on Finland-Swedish identity at the beginning of the twentieth century built strongly on the apprehension of the intimate and unique connection between language, identity, and affect, characteristic of the paradigm of the mother tongue. As a consequence of the importance of literature for the maintenance of Swedish language and culture, literature was long dominated by monolingualism. It is as if fiction was the (most important and perhaps the only) place where a nostalgic dream of a fully Swedish-language reality could be maintained, whereas the surrounding reality was lived and experienced in Finnish (Malmio

2011). This included a strict view on language; at the beginning of the twentieth century, Swedish-writing authors in Finland were to subordinate themselves to the language criteria maintained in Sweden, and all local Finnish features of their Swedish language were "washed away" by editors at publishing houses and banned by teachers and scholars working in language politics (Tidigs 2014). A very correct and "pure" Swedish was the mother tongue of Swedish-minority authors in Finland. However, since the 1980s, dialogues in Finnish have become more common, and, in the 1990s, the use of dialects, mixed language, Finland-Swedish words and expressions, as well as words and expressions in foreign languages turned into a frequent element in Finland-Swedish novels.

How is this change to be explained? The multilingualism of contemporary Finland-Swedish literature goes back to several reasons, literary, cultural, and social. After a period of (relative) Swedish monolingualism being the dominant form in literature, multilingualism is a new aesthetic device, and thus a way to renew literature. This explanation, according to which the changes in literature take place in a dialectic between the familiarization and defamiliarization of literary devices, goes back to a formalist view of literary development (Fokkema 1997). At the end of the 1980s, Finland-Swedish literature also entered the era of postmodernism, an aesthetic current with roots in Anglo-American culture. Postmodernism, with its emphasis on marginalized social groups and minor voices in society, contributed to the popularity of depictions of "oral speech" in contemporary Finnish and Finland-Swedish literature. Besides aesthetic reasons, cultural and social reasons also lie behind literary developments; according to Douwe Fokkema, postmodernism actually needs to be described using a combination of developments, cultural as well as social ones. Finnish society has, during the last thirty years, become a part of the social, technological, and cultural developments connected to late modernity – those of increasing migration and mobility, the emergence of new technologies of communication, and a global capitalism. Altogether, in times of globalization, people, images, and symbolic resources such as language and literature have become more mobile than ever (Yildiz 2011; Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Appadurai 1996). Multilingualism in Finland-Swedish prose today can thus also be seen as a way of depicting and discussing contemporary late modern society and the globalization connected to it.

2 A strange narrator and her language use

The novel *Du eller aldrig* is a story written from the perspective of a narrating I who at times even uses the more anonymous Swedish form *man* "one" of herself.

The story depicts the ordinary life of Aija, a middle-aged female gardener, and the voice we hear (or, the text we read) is hers. Aija lives in Helsinki and is very lonely. By accident she becomes acquainted with Pjotr, a Russian musician who has come to Finland to earn money. They meet a couple of times, but he then disappears from Aija's life as mysteriously as he appeared. Both Pjotr and Aija are outsiders who live on the margins of society. Aija has very few human contacts and lives in an apartment partly underground; Pjotr is poor, steals a car, and visits Aija uninvited. He has, however, a group to which he belongs and with whom he shares a rented flat in the eastern part of Helsinki. The novel depicts a contemporary society; topics like climate change and migration are present in Aija's narration.

Aija is – as all first person narrators are – an unreliable narrator in the sense that we only get her version of the world described. What makes her narration enigmatic is the fact that she communicates in a strange way. She depicts her surroundings with almost scientific precision; she scrutinizes, registers and observes, and picks up words, quotations, replies, and names of things. It is as if the protagonist is mapping her linguistic and physical surroundings all the time. What is more, this mapping is done without any affect or evaluation, and without putting the words and phenomena into a context. Aija is a person who seems to be without emotions. At times, the reader gets small glimpses of a world outside Aija's perspective, and gets the impression that she is unable to understand and interpret what takes place when she meets people. She might be described as being autistic; she sticks to the literal meaning of words, and has very strict rules that control her behaviour. Thus, we never get to know what actually happens between Aija and Pjotr, nor do we find out what has happened in Aija's earlier life, the secret that might be the reason for her unusual way of speaking and acting. In her closet, she hides a box in which she keeps a photo of a small child, but we are never told who the child is or what Aija's relation has been to that baby.

Earlier, the use of other languages than the mother tongue was – if they were used at all – restricted to dialogues; today, multilingualism is used in Finnish literature not only in the rendering of character dialogues, but also in narration (Tiittula and Nuolijärvi 2013, 143). This is true also for *Du eller aldrig*. Multilingualism occurs in the novel both in Aija's narration and in the dialogues that take place between Aija and Pjotr. The two foreign languages that enter the mainly Swedish narration are English and Russian, and they come from various sources: an "oral" multilingualism in speech and dialogue, and a "textual" one which goes back to the various texts, books, and signs that Aija reads and quotes. In her narration she includes, for example, scientific names of flowers in Latin, brand names, and texts she reads. Aija is obsessed with two books, a study of snowflakes by an American amateur photographer, Wilson Bentley, and a biography of Elvis Presley, both originally written, and quoted in the novel, in English. The presence

of "foreign" language is both explicit and extensive. Instead of using a couple of foreign words here and there, the longest English parts are quotations of Elvis's song lyrics that run to several pages. Such an extensive amount of English in a Finland-Swedish novel is a new phenomenon.

Multilingualism enters the story also as a result of Aija meeting Pjotr, a man from another culture and with a mother tongue Aija is unable to understand. With him, Russian texts and words enter the narration, both in their "original" written form and as "translations," in Cyrillic as well as in Roman versions. Their dialogue is mainly in English, with words from Russian and English thrown in in the following manner: "– Postojte, säger han [Pjotr]. – Wait. / Snart är all snön borta, verkligen" [– Postojte, he (Pjotr) says. – Wait. / Soon all the snow will disappear, really] (Kivelä 2006, 107).[1] When Pjotr hands Aija an advertisement written in Russian, she uses a dictionary to translate the text in order to understand it.

However, even the surroundings are characterized by multilingualism. Aija walks in a harbour district in Helsinki and observes the milieu:

> På de låga byggnaderna står ord som Cargo, Tax Free (ТАКСФРИ), Aberdeen Property Services, Lihapiha. Längs de gropiga vägarna och in på partitorgens gårdar åker lastbilar utan bakdelar och flak, märkligt stympade, mitt på trottoaren en krossad mangofrukt, gul. *A squashed mango.* Att halka i. Sådana saker. Höstfärger. (Kivelä 2006, 163; italics in original)
>
> [On the low buildings stand words like Cargo, Tax Free (ТАКСФРИ), Aberdeen Property Services, Lihapiha (the name of a Finnish company that produces and sells meat in various forms). Along the uneven roads and into the yards of the wholesale goods market drive lorries without rear parts and loading platforms, strikingly mutilated, in the middle of the pavement a crushed mango, yellow. *A squashed mango.* To slip on. That kind of thing. Autumn colours.]

The depiction starts with a rendering of the linguistic landscape, the use of language in its written form in public space, which shows the traces of global trade in everyday surroundings. The harbour is the heart of overseas trade, and the multilingualism present there is thus a result of the travels of consumer goods and the words attached to them around the world. The English word "cargo" makes this fact obvious, as well as "Tax Free" and "ТАКСФРИ," the Russian word for "tax free." Aija's description of the milieu shows how global capitalism moulds the visual and linguistic surroundings of people. Besides consumer goods and brand names, (material) words are also mobile. All in all, the use of brand names has become a common feature in contemporary Finnish and Finland-Swedish literature (Ojajärvi 2012).

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1 All translations from Kivelä's novel are my own.

Aija then depicts a smashed mango, first in Swedish, and then translated into English. What is of interest is the fact that Aija does not translate from a foreign language into her own, but the other way round. It is as if the linguistic landscape urges her to express her observations in English too. Or is it the strangeness of the fruit that is the reason? Not only are the English and Russian words in the harbour transported from their "origins" to a "foreign" country: the fruit too is on alien soil, in a place where it does not naturally grow, and needs to be described using a "global" language. The English phrase is in italics, which visually emphasizes its strangeness; but even then, passages from many other texts in the novel are in italics, for example long quotations of texts in English and in Swedish.

Multilingualism is also connected to character portrayal and affects the reader's apprehension of the protagonist as a speaker/user of language and of her mother tongue. Aija not only translates words and phrases from the "familiar" language to the "foreign" one, but also lets long passages of text written in English abruptly enter her narration, often without any commenting frames. The distinction between the "familiar" and the "foreign" language thus diminishes, and even the boundaries between Aija's text and the texts of other authors are partly blurred. For example, when she refers to her favourite book:

> Wilson Bentley blev 66 år gammal. 66 år, tio månader och fjorton dagar.
> Wilson.
> *He refused any help.*
> *The 21st of December 1931 he died, in his farm house.*
> *Alone.*
> (Eller så inte. Han delade numera hus med sin brorson och dennes familj och dessa hade en längre tid varit *worried*. Men ändå: *He refused any help*.) Snön faller över staden, i loskor nu. (Kivelä 2006, 25; italics in original)
>
> [Wilson Bentley became 66 years old. 66 years, ten months and fourteen days.
> Wilson.
> *He refused any help.*
> *The 21st of December 1931 he died, in his farm house. Alone.*
> (Or then not. He now shared the house with his nephew and his family and they had already been *worried* for a while. But anyhow: *He refused any help*.) Snow falls over the city, in sheets now.]

Aija moves between text and "reality" without taking any notice of the fact that the worlds she depicts exist on different ontological levels. For her, the different levels run into each other, and so do different languages: long quotations in English can appear just like that, or English and Swedish can flow into each other as if there were no difference between them. What I wrote earlier about the absence of evaluation concerns Aija's use of language as well. Swedish, which might be taken as her mother tongue, does not have a special status in her narration.

On one of her strictly planned trips to the city centre, Aija enters an orange tent in front of a real, well-known department store in Helsinki, Stockmann's, and the statue *Tre smeder* [Three Blacksmiths]. The tent is like an alternative reality; only Russian and English are spoken there, and extraordinary people populate it; they are not only foreigners but described as if they were poor circus people. Aija buys *castanea sativa*, roasted chestnuts, and receives a flyer from the musician outside the tent. She goes home, finds her Russian dictionary, and starts to interpret the note. It is written mostly in Russian, with a Finnish street name, Nukkeruusunkuja, a place that exists even in reality in Eastern Helsinki.

> Framför mig på pappret, som snarast är en lapp, ler en man mot mig, det är ett leende model "blixtrande", håret är svart.
> ВЕЧЕРИНКА ЭЛВИСА
> Кажлую субботy в январе в бчасов
> У Татяны (Русское кафе)
> Nukkeruusunkuja 8
> До встречи! (С бутылкой и хорошим настроением)
> Jag läser, bredvid mig har jag ordboken, словарь. (Kivelä 2006, 69)
>
> [In front of me on the paper, which is rather a small piece, a man smiles at me, it is a smile of the model "scintillating," the hair is black.
> ВЕЧЕРИНКА ЭЛВИСА
> Кажлую субботy в январе в бчасов
> У Татяны (Русское кафе)
> Nukkeruusunkuja 8
> До встречи! (С бутылкой и хорошим настроением)
> I read, next to me I have the dictionary, словарь.]

We follow Aija's strivings to understand Pjotr and his friends and to overcome the barrier of foreign languages. She finds out there is going to be an Elvis Presley party at Tatjana's Russian café on Nukkeruusunkuja. Simultaneously, she also acts as a stand-in for the reader, who might be unable to understand Russian. English, on the contrary, is not translated.

3 The destiny of the mother tongue

Aija and Pjotr have a strange romance. We never get to know whether he merely takes advantage of her and her precarious situation, but we are informed that he has a family in St Petersburg. They are an odd couple, and, seen from the perspective of the mother tongue paradigm, have a romance in which the traditional emotional, national, and gendered associations of languages are turned

upside down. Aija's literal and formal use of language makes almost an inhuman impression due to its lack of emotions and evaluation. Pjotr is her opposite; his replies express an emotional attitude towards many things, and his language use is characterized by informality, Russian swear words, and broken English. The male protagonist is, then, the one with the emotional expressions and a will to communicate.

Aija, the user of her mother tongue, talks very little, and her relation to language is rather that of quoting and translating. In literature, female characters often become the "carriers" of emotions and ideals that the stories promote, and female protagonists just as often portray and symbolize nationalism (Oxfeldt 2012). This is of course obvious already in the term "mother tongue." Here, however, we have a female character that is like a void, and her use of language lacks all the qualities related to the mother tongue in the linguistic "family romance" described by Yildiz, that of the intimate connection between affect, identity, and nation. We might say that, in Aija, we finally meet a character and a world without a mother tongue. She can also be seen to personify the outcome of late modern development, described by Fredric Jameson as the "disappearance of the individual subject," which includes the end of all kinds of affections and emotions (Jameson 1995, 9–31).

The deconstruction of the mother tongue paradigm then continues in a passage in which Pjotr describes the attitudes of Finnish people to Russia, and declares his own identity. Pjotr explains his musical repertoire to Aija as follows: his friend Zjenja wants him to play and sing Russian songs because then people will give him more money, while Pjotr only wants to perform Elvis Presley's songs. Pjotr argues as follows (an example of the lengthy English passages in the novel):

> Finns have an odd relation to Russia. They hate the Russians but they love the food and the music and the temperament and all the time they boast with their place between east and west. [...] But I refuse. I am no national doll. You know, like a matujska. I love Elvis and I play Elvis. I am the Elvis of Peterburg. [...] It is true, I won competition. (Kivelä 2006, 145)

While Aija's multilingualism mostly comes from texts, Pjotr uses the broken English of everyday speech. The question of national belonging and national identity – central elements of the paradigm of the mother tongue – is taken up for re-evaluation; a Russian man compares national identity to a female wooden doll that always includes a smaller copy inside the bigger one. Matryoshka dolls being a very typical Russian souvenir, Pjotr rejects an identity or a role as a stereotypical representative of his national belonging, and wants instead to be an American singer. This is, of course, as much a stereotype as the matryoshka doll, even if the role of Elvis in a Russian context is of course less national and more that of a global popular culture celebrity. And to be the "Elvis of Peterburg," a combination

of West and East, the US and Russia, all in broken English, is a truly hybrid identity, and an outcome of the mobility of symbols, objects, and people connected to late modernity. Neither economic nor national arguments, probably the two most powerful reasons behind different ideologies concerning language use, are relevant for him. Pjotr has left his nation, identity, and mother tongue behind him despite the fact that there are small-scale economic profits to be gained if he sticks to his mother tongue. Now he is in Finland, prefers to sing in English, and uses the late modern lingua franca to describe his identity and belonging. Neither of the characters in Kivelä's novel, then, fit into the mother tongue paradigm, and both represent a new relationship to language.

4 Minority literature in a postmonolingual phase

The topic of the mother tongue is – naturally – of special interest for linguistic minorities because their right to use their mother tongue is often neglected, or even threatened. Finland-Swedes are an "old" minority with a special and complicated relationship to the questions of mother tongue and national identity. Swedish is the second official language of Finland and the language of a socially and economically privileged minority when compared to other minorities in Finland, like the Sami.

On one hand, it is problematic to talk about a "monolingual" or "postmonolingual" situation in Finland due to the fact that the country has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. In that sense, the conditions of Finland-Swedish literature are not clearly monolingual. On another level, however, Yildiz's ideas can be used to study how an old minority literature, which for a long time had as its primary task constructing and sustaining Finland-Swedish identity, reflects upon the linguistic changes that are taking place in the contemporary world. What is more, Yildiz's view of a "postmonolingual mode of reading" which is "attentive to both multilingual practices and the monolingual paradigm" (2012, 21) is clearly fruitful as a point of departure for an analysis of Kivelä's novel.

The deconstruction of the mother tongue paradigm that takes place in *Du eller aldrig* is, I think, a sign of quite a radical change that is taking place in Finland-Swedish literature. The multilingualism in *Du eller aldrig* has several functions: it portrays a world of linguistic and cultural encounters, serves as a part of the aesthetic style of the novel, and contributes to the portrayal of its protagonists. It also depicts the contemporary mobile world by showing the linguistic landscape and the presence of many languages in the urban milieu of Helsinki. And the novel is not alone in its strivings. As Julia Tidigs (2016) has shown in a

recent article in which she studies multilingualism, space, and mobility in two Finland-Swedish novels published in 2012 and 2013, the territories of the mother tongue are now under renegotiation.

As Yildiz points out, literary multilingualism may relate to everyday language practices and have as its point of departure everyday code switching, for example. Literary texts, however, not only simply reflect these practices, but remould them in order to imagine new formations, modes of belonging, critical ways to deal with the monolingual paradigm; and they disrupt the homology that is taken for granted between a language and a certain ethnocultural identity (Yildiz 2011, 25–26). A going "beyond the mother tongue towards a potential multilingual paradigm entails rewriting this linguistic family romance," Yildiz (2011, 13) explains.

Can we say, then, that Kivelä's novel goes *beyond* the mother tongue? This question is best discussed by studying the novel's enigmatic title, *Du eller aldrig*, of importance especially because of its ungrammatical and odd use of Swedish. "You or never" makes a poetic impression and simultaneously evokes an allusion to the phrase *nu eller aldrig*, which takes us to one of the important intertexts of the novel, the song "It's Now or Never" by Elvis Presley. It is as if the author has misspelled the first letter in the title. However, this grammatical "failure" carries a meaning and has linguistic consequences. While "now or never" is a phrase conveying an understandable meaning about the unique nature of a certain moment or situation, "you or never" is put together out of "asymmetrical" words that belong to different categories and thus create an impression of inconsistency when combined. A new formation is created using a new kind of logic, and thus also a new belonging. But the misspelling might also be seen as a way of dealing with the paradigm of the mother tongue on a grammatical level related to the demands on the correctness of Swedish in Finland. The mother tongue paradigm's insistence on (the high status and correctness of) one's "first" language is thus deconstructed. When interpreted against the background of the different ways of dealing with multilingualism, identity, national belonging, and the mother tongue, the novel offers a rupture in the view according to which Finland-Swedish literature is the carrier of the "voice" of the Swedish minority in Finland. The ultimate moment is replaced by an ultimate relation, a new (linguistic) mode of romance and belonging, which is made despite the linguistic or grammatical laws and boundaries, or the tiny acoustic differences, that keep words like *du* "you" and *nu* "now" apart.

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