

REVIEW

DOROTA MELERSKA: *Älvdalskan – mellan språkdöd och revitalisering*. Poznań: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2011. 215 pp.

The dissertation discussed here is one of three written on contemporary Övdalian since the beginning of the 1900's. Övdalian (Swe. *älvdalska*, Övd. *övdalskä* or *övkallmåleð*), sometimes also called *Elfdalian* in English is a language spoken in the Swedish municipality of Älvdalen.¹ Unlike the two other dissertations (Levander 1909 and Garbacz 2010) and a number of recent papers that are concerned with the structural aspects of Övdalian (e.g. Rosenkvist 2006, 2007, 2010, Garbacz 2006, 2008a, 2008b) this work focuses on the sociolinguistic situation of Övdalian. The main aim of the author is threefold: first, she aims to describe the usage of Övdalian in Älvdalen, giving a detailed picture of its speakers and factors that contribute to keeping the variety alive; second, she evaluates the vitality of Övdalian by placing it on the Fishman's *Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale for Threatened Languages* (GIDS Scale, see Fishman 1991) and discusses past efforts to revitalise the language. Finally, she proposes a number of measurements that can be taken in order to revitalize the variety and discusses how they might be applied on Övdalian. The investigation is based on data collected by Melerska during fieldwork in Älvdalen, and the data are both quantitative and qualitative.

The dissertation contains nine chapters and those may be divided into three parts. The first, introductory part embraces the first three chapters, the second one consists of the subsequent four (Chapter 4 to Chapter 7) and the summarizing chapters, Chapter 8 and 9, constitute the last part.

In the introductory Chapter 1, the reader learns that the quantitative part of Melerska's research is based on 53 questionnaires answered by pupils, aged between 13 and 15, from the secondary school in Älvdalen, on 18 questionnaires answered by parents of the above-mentioned pupils, and on 18 questionnaires answered by officials at the municipality of Älvdalen. The qualitative part is based on in-depth interviews with fourteen Övdalians, aged between 25 and 81, of which twelve speak Övdalian and the remaining two understand it. The questionnaires aimed at the pupils and the parents are rendered as appendices. In Chapter 2, the reader gets general information on Övdalian, with informative and clear maps and diagrams. A substantial part of the

¹ I term Övdalian a language, following the arguments in favour of such classification put forth by e.g. Steensland (1990), and Williams (2007). In her dissertation, Melerska does not wish to take a stand in favour of classifying Övdalian as a language or as a dialect.

chapter is devoted to describing the speakers of Övdalian, with respect to their age, sex, descent, and family roles. The results are then compared with the results of Hultgren (1983), showing a clear decrease of speakers during the last thirty years. Inhabitants most likely to speak Övdalian are the so-called NORMs². An overview of the characteristics of Övdalian is presented in Chapter 3, including the phonological, morphological and the lexical level of the language.

The main part of the dissertation starts with Chapter 4, where Fishman's GIDS Scale is introduced and the question of endangered languages presented. Melerska concludes that Övdalian is to be placed on the seventh and partially also on the sixth grade of this scale, i.e. that it is mostly spoken by the older generations and that the language is only partially transmitted to the children. The use of Övdalian in different situations is explored in detail. One interesting result is that young people are most enthusiastic towards Övdalian, although they do not use it much (and only within very few domains) and have a weaker command of the language compared with adults. Generally, the enthusiasm for language is not always followed by language usage in everyday life and this tendency is visible among all speakers.

Chapter 5 highlights the revitalization efforts made in Älvdalen up to now, such as increase of literacy in Övdalian, education in the language, use of new technologies. Other activities have also been observed, such as establishing the association for the preservation of Övdalian, *Ulum Dalska*, and the Övdalian language council, *Rådjärum*, as well as the creation of a language grant that is awarded to the Övdalian-speaking youth. The effectiveness of these measurements is also discussed. The situation of Övdalian today is presented in Chapter 6. The main question asked is whether Övdalian or Swedish are spoken in different situations, and the results show that Swedish is preferred in situations seen as formal, whereas Övdalian is preferred in informal and familiar contexts. It turns out, Övdalian is no longer necessary for the Övdalian identity and there is an increasing tolerance for mixing up Övdalian with Swedish, especially among young people. Possible revitalization strategies are the subject of Chapter 7. Melerska proposes that Övdalian should be introduced both in kindergartens and in schools, partially following an earlier proposal put forth in a lead article in the local newspaper *Mora Tidning* in October 2007. She also argues that all measurements that would increase the use of Övdalian and raise its prestige (as introducing Övdalian in the local media) are very valuable for the survival of the language.

The third part of the dissertation is a conclusion presented in Chapter 8 and a summary of the dissertation in Polish, found in Chapter 9. In the appendices, the author has included a number of facsimiles of Övdalian books, a newspaper and a couple of relevant pictures of Övdalian runes. Also two of three questionnaires used in the study are given in the appendix.

The subject of the dissertation is a bold choice, as the author sets about with a language that is still quite unknown and poorly described. In Poland, Övdalian is almost completely unknown, if one does not count earlier contributions by Melerska (2007, 2009, and 2010). Melerska is hereby the only expert on Övdalian working in Poland. In addition, the present study is the first bigger sociolinguistic study that

² I.e. *non-mobile older rural males* (Chambers & Trudgill 1980:33ff).

focuses on Övdalian alone. The dissertation would however profit from having a more carefully planned structure and a deeper discussion. Some parts appear to have been prepared hastily. The obtained results are interesting and intuitive, but an extensive discussion of their validity for the Övdalian community would be particularly desirable. Without such a discussion, the reader cannot be sure that the dissertation shows the real attitudes towards Övdalian in Älvdalen.

One of the interesting issues discussed by Melerska is how to revitalize Övdalian. While teaching the language in kindergartens and schools aimed at native-speakers seems very promising, the idea of teaching Övdalian as a foreign language appears to the undersigned as less reasonable. The result of such measures can be an Övdalian-Swedish pidgin that may weaken Övdalian considerably instead of bolstering it. Another interesting issue in this context is which variant of Övdalian one should revitalize and why just this variant. Finally, it would be interesting to ask which criteria a person must meet in order to be labelled a speaker of Övdalian.

Melerska's dissertation is an interesting contribution both to the field of Övdalian (socio)linguistics and to the study of endangered languages in general. It is also worth noting that this contribution was written at a Polish university, showing the research breadth at The Department of Scandinavian Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University.

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