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The committee of Språkförsvaret (literally: The Language Defence) supports Mats Blakstad´s application, also signed by nine professional linguists, regarding an international language code för Övdalian (Elfdalian, Swedish Älvdalska). Anna Westerberg, who represents the government organization Institute for Language and Folklore in Sweden (Institutet för språk och folkminnen), has however objected to this application. The Språkförsvaret committee agrees in principle with Henrik Rosenkvist´s and Guus Kroonen´s criticism of Anna Westerberg's objection. In the following text, we present our own position on the subject.

1. Anna Westerberg writes:

”Älvdalska is traditionally regarded as a Swedish dialect, because it is spoken in Sweden and closely related to all other Scandinavian vernaculars. If it had been spoken in Norway, it would have been looked upon as a Norwegian dialect. While the traditional dialects are naturally developed from Old Scandinavian, modern standard Swedish and Norwegian (Dano-Norwegian and New Norwegian) are constructions resulting from official language cultivation.”

It is true that Övdalian, both as standard Swedish and standard Norwegian (Bokmål and Nynorsk) emanates from Old Norse as well as Icelandic and Faroese. The latter are of course accepted as separate languages. According to a Swadesh test, as implemented by the linguist Östen Dahl, Övdalian is equidistant from Standard Swedish as Icelandic, while Övdalian and Icelandic are the same distance from each other. The argument about Norwegian language policy is purely hypothetical.

According to the linguists we have consulted, there is no variety of language in Norway, emanating from Old Norse, that is as far from standard Norwegian as Övdalian is from standard Swedish. Also, there has been no application to the Norwegian authorities, that the official status of a Norwegian variety be changed from dialect to a regional language. Even if that were the case, that would be an irrelevant argument from a scientific viewpoint. Each language variety must be subject to an independent investigation.

1. Anna Westerberg writes:

” According to information given by the Government Offices, there is currently no dialogue going on about the status of Älvdalska. On the part of the Swedish Government, the case is closed.”

Anna Westerberg is jumping ahead here. The government has never officially declared the case to be permanently dismissed. Indeed, that would be a strange approach, given that the Council of Europe has, in recent years, continuously urged the Swedish government, in about five of the supervision rounds, to reconsider the position of Övdalian, or at least to let an independent research group to investigate the issue.

Moreover, there is no reason to believe that the Swedish Government would continue to turn a deaf ear on growing public support for a change of status of Övdalian, which is certainly the case today. Who could have imagined in 2005 that a unanimous parliament (sv. riksdag) in 2009 would establish the position of Swedish as Sweden's main language?

1. Anna Westerberg writes:

”Most linguists in the world are not familiar with Älvdalska. In fact, the intense academic focus on Älvdalska in recent years has been limited to a few linguists at a few universities in Scandinavia.”

Most linguists are only familiar with a few languages; there is of course no linguist in the world who is familiar with all of it's languages. Very few linguists are familiar with the phenomenon of discontinuous noun phrases in Old Icelandic. But should this fact have any consequences for the status of Old Icelandic [as a language]? The International Conference on Elfdalian in Copenhagen, 7-8 May 2015, gave rise to considerable public attention about Övdalian, both within and outside the Nordic countries (<http://www.språkförsvaret.se/sf/index.php?Id=400>). The comprehensive study "Studies in Övdalian Morphology and Syntax" (<http://www.jbe-platform.com/content/books/9789027269133>) published by John Benjamin Publishing House in 2015, has been internationally commissioned by over 3,000 university libraries. There are about 16,000 to 18,000 universities in the world.

1. Anna Westerberg writes:

”Anyone with some insights into the subject matter would agree that Älvdalska is very different from standard Swedish. However, this could be said about many other Swedish dialects too.”

And further:

“If you take a broader perspective on Älvdalska, you will discover that most of its grammatical features are also found elsewhere, not only in neighbouring areas but also in northern Sweden and parts of Finland where Swedish is traditionally spoken.”

Anna Westerberg states that many other dialects also differ greatly from standard Swedish. But do they differ as much, or more significantly, from standard Swedish as Övdalian does? If so, Anna Westerberg should invoke a Swadesh test which shows this. The crucial question in this context is whether all the language features that distinguish Övdalian from standard Swedish, also are found in some other language variety in the Swedish-speaking areas of Sweden and Finland. Anna Westerberg admits in fact that this is not the case. Are there, for example, nasal vowels in any other language variety in the Nordic countries? This phenomenon has even disappeared in Icelandic.

Övdalian sound system, grammar, syntax and vocabulary has been addressed in a number of treatises, essays, articles, speeches and parliamentary motions (listed at the end of this letter). The differences between Övdalian and standard Swedish are systemic differences. We believe that the evidence is overwhelming for Övdalian being so different from standard Swedish, that it must be characterized as a separate language.

1. Anna Westerberg writes finally:

”The supporters of this application choose to disregard the fact there are still many traditional Swedish dialects that are very different from Standard Swedish and therefore regarded as separate languages by their speakers. In my opinion, the idea of proclaiming Älvdalska to be more important than all the others is deeply problematic…”

Anna Westerberg seems to assert something like the "Law of Jante" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Jante>) of dialects, when she states that one should not proclaim Övdalian as more important than any other language variety in Sweden. In fact Övdalian is probably the second most studied and codified language variety, derived from Old Norse, in Sweden after standard Swedish. There is a local language council in Älvdalen, which has helped to standardize Övdalian; there are grammars, dictionaries and a standardized orthography, adapted to the Övdalian sound system. There have been books published in Övdalian, and also educational material about Övdalian at university level. There is instruction in Övdalian in primary schools in the Älvdalen Municipality and even university courses.

Övdalian, which has around 2,500 speakers, has a very strong local support. Ulum Dalska (Association for Övdalian conservation), founded in 1984, is probably Sweden's largest language association with nearly 2,000 members. It's Facebook group has nearly 3,000 members, most of them writing in Övdalian. The Älvdalen municipality, which supports Övdalian, has about 7000 inhabitants. The northern parishes, Särna and Idre, however, do not belong to the Övdalian language area. Last but not least, there is a strong interest among professional linguists, both nationally and internationally, for this unique language.

We do not understand why it would be "deeply problematic" to give Övdalian the status of a regional language. Probably lurking in the background is a fear that such a decision will lead to a domino effect. It has perhaps crossed Anna Westerberg´s mind that a number of representatives of different dialects in Sweden will join the queue and insist that their dialects should be recognized as regional or minority languages. These fears are much exaggerated. The overwhelming majority of dialects in Sweden are transition dialects. Very few are at the extreme end of a dialect continuum and can demonstrate the same linguistic distance from the standard Swedish as Övdalian. Övdalian thus shows systematic differences at all levels against standard Swedish. The vast majority of dialect speakers are content to continue to use their dialect in it's accepted locality and context. They simply do not want to spend time and resources needed to raise their own dialect to the status of minority language, which in principle means developing its own written language, grammars and dictionaries. However, this what the Övdalians have been prepared to do, which says a lot about their linguistic self-esteem.

There are already a number of similar minority or regional languages in Europe, whose status has changed in recent decades. This applies to Aranese (around 4700 speakers) in Spain, to Kashubian (around 108,000 speakers) in Poland, to Cornish (about 500 speakers) in the UK, to Scottish English in Scotland, and to Rusyn / Ruthenian (about 23 000 speakers) in Serbia and Slovakia. The Italian Parliament passed a law in 1999, which acknowledged twelve minority languages. Of these Catalan, Franco-Provençal, French, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan and Sardinian - like the Italian language – originate from Latin in the same way as standard Swedish and Övdalian originate from Old Norse. To our knowledge this has not led to any great flood of applications from dialect speakers wanting to change the status of their own language varieties in the countries mentioned.

In our view, the issue of a language variety being recognized as a minority or a regional languages in relation to standard Swedish in Sweden must be decided case by case. Two criteria must be met; the language variety must be incomprehensible to a user of the standard Swedish and the language variety must as well be supported by such an involvement of the users that there is a reasonable chance that it survives.

**The committee of Språkförsvaret**

by

Christer Janson/Per-Åke Lindblom/Arne Rubensson

**Note:** Språkförsvaret (literally: The Language Defence) is a grassroot organization (NGO) in Sweden, founded in 2005. Its goal is to defend the Swedish language, advocate multilingualism and inter-nordic language comprehension.

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