

# The Revitalization of Elfdalian

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## Abstract

This article depicts the process of language revitalization of the endangered Elfdalian language spoken in Sweden. Having witnessed a language decline, Ulum Dalska was founded in 1984 with the ambition to revitalize Elfdalian. In 2004, these efforts were boosted due to the joining of the academia and the Municipality of Älvdalen to the revitalization process. Still not recognized as an official language in Sweden, in 2016, Elfdalian acquired an ISO language code and was introduced into the school system. Elfdalian was further empowered by publications in and about the language, as well as a standard orthography, and can thus be seen as both an *abstand* and an *ausbau* language. Whether these factors will be sufficient to reverse the language shift and to grant Elfdalian a language status in Sweden is yet to be seen.

**Ig wet it ukin an ar si'tt aut, åtå die åvå saggt an ar triþo fuota, og laungg kuolswart rumpu. Ig såg ien i Luok iessn, mes sig war dar. För ig war nest syster og war pig mes ig war ungg, ig, sir du<sup>1</sup> (Sapir & Nyström, 2005: 56).**

## Introduction

The term 'language revitalization', also referred to as 'reversing language shift' (Fishman, 1991), denotes an attempt to extend the number of speakers and domains of a language. Grenoble & Whaley (2006) distinguish between 'language revitalization' and 'language maintenance', the latter aiming to protect current levels of domains in use.

In this article, I will account for the 'three-legged' revitalization of the Elfdalian<sup>2</sup> language, relying on three main actors: *Ulum Dalska, föreningen för älvdalskans bevarande* ('Let's speak Elfdalian, the Association for the Preservation of Elfdalian', henceforth Ulum Dalska), representing the speech community, the academia, and the Municipality of Älvdalen<sup>3</sup>.

First, I will put Elfdalian in a broader context, and account for its background and decline. Later, I will depict the current revitalization process and the quest to recognize Elfdalian as a language. Finally, I will

describe the standardization of Elfdalian with the focus on the standard Elfdalian orthography.

Hultgren (1983), Helgander (2004) and Melerska (2011) show that speaking Elfdalian has a symbolic value and plays an important role as an identity marker among the inhabitants of Övdaln. Helgander (2004) shows that the will to preserve the vernacular, sometimes in its old form, does not always coincide with the actual behavior of the speakers.

Elfdalian shows a great deal of archaic and idiosyncratic linguistic features, some preserved from Old Norse, Proto-Germanic or even Indo-European stages, others eternalizing oppositions, which existed in remote stages of Old Norse, including such that no longer exist in the otherwise rather archaic Icelandic (cf. Sapir, 2005). These features gave Elfdalian in some media the epithet 'the Viking forest language'<sup>4</sup>.

## Background

Elfdalian is the language of some 2500 persons in Övdaln (in the Municipality of Älvdalen), in West Central Sweden. Elfdalian belongs to the Dalecarlian (Swedish *Dalmål*) vernaculars of the East Scandinavian language family and it has been spoken continuously, in its different evolutionary stages from Old Dalecarlian, at least since the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>. Traditionally considered a dialect, it was granted an ISO code by SIL

<sup>1</sup> In English: 'I don't know what he looked like, but they said he had three legs and a long, coal-black tail. I saw one in Luoka once when I was there. For, you see, I was at my sister's place, working as a maid then, when I was young.' A rendering of a story about the elemental *Barin*, recorded by Gunnar Nyström from 1967 and told by Klukker-Ilma, born in 1891, and published in an Elfdalian study resource.

<sup>2</sup> In Elfdalian: *övdalska* or *dalska* (actually referring to the dialect group of Dalecarlian (Dalmål)). Alternative names used in English are *Övdalian*, *Övdalsk* and *Älvdalska* (actually the Swedish name).

<sup>3</sup> I will distinguish between the old parish of *Övdaln* (Swedish *Älvdalen*), the traditional territory, where Elfdalian has been spoken, and the current Municipality of *Älvdalen*, which includes two additional parishes, Särna and Idre.

<sup>4</sup> Having been involved in different activities to promote Elfdalian myself, I cannot consider myself a mere observer in the Elfdalian context. However, I will attempt to be as objective as possible and share my impressions and observations from Elfdalian from the past 14 years.

<sup>5</sup> *Járnberaland*, which appears to correspond to Övdaln, is described in the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Sverri's saga Övdaln (Saga Sverris konungs, 1834). Levander identifies the age of Dalecarlian by analyzing sound shifts (Levander, 1925:39).

International (2016) and can thus be regarded as semi-recognized language. Moreover, it is recommended to be recognized as such by a large number of linguists (cf. Dahl et al. (2007), Råddjårum (2005) and organizations. Due to its distance to Swedish and the fact that the language is partially standardized, used by children, in publications and cultural contexts, it can be seen as both an *abstand* and an *ausbau* language.

The decline of Elfdalian has manifested itself in several areas: (1) the language system<sup>6</sup>, (2) the number of speakers, (3) transgenerational transmission, as well as (4) linguistic domains. Elfdalian is on stages 6 (transgenerational transfer within the family), 7 (cultural activities mainly among the elderly; most speakers are adults) and a weak 5 (some reading and writing skills) on Fishman's GIDS (Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale), where 8 is the most threatened stage (Melerska, 2011) (Fishman, 1991). The evolution of Elfdalian during the past century appears to follow a path similar to a large number of other minority or endangered varieties, which have seen a decline due to pressure from a dominant language. However, as we shall see further on, Elfdalian differs from other minor Nordic varieties in its current revitalization process.

Helgander (2012) expresses pessimism as to the perspectives to revitalize Elfdalian. In his analysis of these perspectives, Helgander cites examples from failed attempts to revitalize other varieties in the world and the difficulties parents face in taking the responsibility for the transgenerational transfer of endangered languages (cf. also Melerska, 2011). In this context, I think it is important to cite successful examples of language revitalization from around the world, such as the Sámi languages in Scandinavia, and likewise consider the positive developments, which *have* taken place in the Elfdalian context during the past years.

### Classical Elfdalian and its Decline

Written Elfdalian records from the 17<sup>th</sup> century infer that the changes in the vocabulary, phonetics and phonology, inflectional morphology and syntax since that time and up to Levander's (1909) description of Elfdalian have been relatively minor. The influence of Swedish on the Elfdalian spoken in the village of Åsär (Swedish *Åsen*) was described by Levander (1909) as "hardly at all" present on the phonetic level, and "extremely insignificant" on the morphological and syntactical level, albeit "more powerful" on the lexical level. This type of Elfdalian is often referred to as *Classical Elfdalian*<sup>7</sup>. Elfdalian is often referred to as an

archaic language. However, it is important to bear in mind that, although being probably more archaic or conservative than modern Swedish in many aspects, Elfdalian likewise displays a large number of innovative and local features, which do not always coincide with Swedish. This combination of a high number of features differing from modern, standard Swedish is probably the reason why Elfdalian creates this 'archaic' or 'exotic' impression among Swedish speakers. Indeed, these differences between 'Classical' Elfdalian and Swedish, on all linguistic levels, render mutual intelligibility impossible (cf. Dahl, 2005; Ringmar, 2005; Sapir, 2005). It is also in the light of this distance, or *abstand*, from Swedish and other Nordic varieties that the quest for a language status should be seen, a distance that has apparently enhanced a linguistic self-awareness among the Elfdalian speech community.

Until the beginning or first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Elfdalian was typically the language of the home domain<sup>8</sup> (Levander 1953:397), as well as of the village and the parish. Children in the village schools, who encountered Swedish for the first time, conceived it as a 'totally alien language'<sup>9</sup> and continued speaking Elfdalian to each other. According to Hultgren (1983:19), already in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Swedish was used as the *lingua franca* for communication between persons from different parishes in Dalarna, as mutual intelligibility between the different Dalecarlian vernaculars was limited. This can also constitute a fair motivation to considering Elfdalian a separate language from its Dalecarlian sister-vernaculars.

Compared to its relative stability until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the differences between Classical Elfdalian and 21<sup>st</sup> century Modern Elfdalian are significant (cf. Garbacz 2010, Helgander 2004, Svenonius 2007). Helgander (2005) shows that Elfdalian, around 100 years after Levander's (1909) study, had undergone an ever-growing interference from Swedish on all linguistic levels. For instance, Swedish words could easily replace older Elfdalian words and the traditional complex inflectional system had become simplified. Moreover, transgenerational transmission of Elfdalian was interrupted in some families, beginning with the central village, Tjyörtjbynn (Kyrkbyn). This happened partially due to contemporary prevailing theories, suggesting that monolingualism was more favorable for children, and that, due to the dominant role of Swedish, Swedish was the preferred language to

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Garbacz', I prefer to make a rough division between periods of time, into *Classical Elfdalian* (spoken until 1959) and *Modern Elfdalian* (spoken from 1960).

<sup>8</sup> An exception to this rule is Tjyörtjbynn, the main village, where Swedish had already begun to gain terrain as the home language at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> In this, the experience Elfdalian-speaking children bore a stronger resemblance to that of children who spoke minority languages, e.g. Finnish or Sámi languages, rather than of children who spoke a Nordic or Swedish variety.

<sup>6</sup> This implies a simplification of the language phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon, or other shifts in those towards the majority language through interferences by the latter.

<sup>7</sup> Garbacz (2010) divides Elfdalian into three periods according to the generations of speakers. Differently from

talk to the children, thus securing them with good perspectives for their future. More than that, some of the children, who did grow up with Elfdalian at home, imported the majority Swedish language from school back home and never resumed speaking Elfdalian again.

The language decline also manifests itself in the share of Elfdalian speakers in Övdal – from some 90% to 95% of the local population in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Levander, 1909; Levander, 1925) down to merely 34% of the population in 2008 (Larsson & Welin, 2008).

Helgander (2004) regards the decline as a natural process, a consequence of extended mobility, mass-media, migration and openness to the outside world. However, I conceive the strong pressure from the part of the Swedish state as a crucial additional factor contributing to the decline of Elfdalian. This was a part of a conscious Swedification process, by which standard Swedish was to become the language of the whole population of Sweden at the cost of the minor languages and varieties, and where church and school have been useful tools in promoting this agenda. In 1929, an anonymous article in the local newspaper *Skansvakten* ('*The Mound Watch*') explicitly blamed the Swedish school system for carrying out an 'extermination campaign' against Elfdalian (Hultgren 1983:37).

Further factors that contributed to the decline of Elfdalian were the gradual closing of the village schools between the 1960s and 2010 and their replacement by two main schools, as well as the introduction of preschools in Övdal from 1975 and onwards (Ulla Schütt through personal communication). Thus, Swedish became the majority language, first in schools, and later on in preschools, which the youngest children began to attend. For many children from Elfdalian-speaking families, the inevitable consequence of being exposed to a majority language at a young age, combined with feelings of shame and lacking the tools to develop their vernacular was language loss. Aids similar to those offered to Swedish-speaking children, such as instruction, books or cultural activities in the mother tongue, were not offered to Elfdalian-speaking children.

## Revitalization

### Actors and actions

As a reaction to the language decline, a campaign named *Rädda Älvdalskan* 'Save Elfdalian', where Elfdalian was consistently referred to as a language, was launched by journalist Björn Rehnström in the regional *Mora Tidning* newspaper in 1983. More than 500 readers answered questions concerning Elfdalian attached to one of the newspaper editions, most of whom were positive to the campaign. In the next step, an open meeting was organized with the scope to discuss ways to preserve Elfdalian and to establish a

language association. The meeting, likewise organized by *Mora Tidning*, on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1984, had an immense turnout and was concluded with the foundation of Ulum Dalska. Initially counting some 700 members, the number of members escalated to some 2000 after some years, turning it into the largest language association in Sweden (Ulum Dalska, 2017; Björn Rehnström by personal communication).

Ever since its foundation, Ulum Dalska has been organizing diverse activities aiming to maintain and revitalize the Elfdalian language, such as arranging *glåmåkvelder*<sup>10</sup> 'conversation evenings' translation groups, producing preschool materials and conversation guides, organizing surveys among the speakers and spreading information about Elfdalian. Likewise, Ulum Dalska has been co-organizing musicals, conferences, language courses, school activities, as well as assisting scholars, who wished to study or document Elfdalian (Elfquist, 2004).

Swedish academia has been engaged with Elfdalian for centuries, mainly within the field of dialectology. One of prominent representatives of this engagement was Lars Levander, an Uppsala scholar of linguistics and folklore, who documented the rather archaic Åsär variety of Elfdalian, Dalecarlian in general, as well as traditions and the daily lives of the people of Övdal (Levander 1909, 1925, 1928). His documentation constitutes an important source of knowledge about Elfdalian and Dalecarlian.

Established in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the main activities within the field of dialectology consisted of collecting large amounts of data from various dialects, and archiving them for later analysis. However, only a small amount of these data has been analyzed and studied further (Gunnar Nyström through personal communication). Moreover, hardly any of these were shared with the speech communities from which they were collected, and they were almost never used to enhance the varieties and their speakers. Moreover, the *Landsmålsalfabetet* (Swedish Dialect Alphabet) employed in the documentation of the dialects, a phonetic alphabet, was inaccessible to laymen and thus also to any speaker of a variety who might have wished to read those transcripts. Similarly to his contemporary fellow dialectologists, Levander was not engaged in preservation efforts of Elfdalian, nor in transmitting his metalinguistic knowledge back to the speech community. The accumulated material in Elfdalian at ISOF (the Swedish *Institute for Language and Folklore*) consists of about 100 hours of recordings of Classical Elfdalian, only a negligible part of which has been transcribed and published to date (Gunnar Nyström by personal communication).

<sup>10</sup> The verb *glåmä* 'to speak' was common in older stages of Elfdalian, but was reintroduced to the speech community through this compound.

In 1987, Lars Steensland, a scholar of Slavic Linguistics and of Elfdalian, was the first to urge for a language status for Elfdalian. Steensland justified a language status by the distance from Swedish; the function of Elfdalian as a separate language system than Swedish, as well as by the linguistic identity of the speech community. Moreover, Steensland advocated teaching Elfdalian-speaking children at least something about their native tongue at school (Steensland, 1987). Steensland was moreover the first scholar initiating projects aimed specifically towards the speech community, such as publishing dictionaries, books about Elfdalian place names, terms for birds and plants, as well as translating and publishing parts of the New Testament in Elfdalian. Steensland's Swedish-Elfdalian-Swedish dictionary is available as an online open source (Steensland, 2010).

Although approached by Ulum Dalska at several occasions, Swedish authorities had shown little interest in Elfdalian and its revitalization efforts. However, a shift in this approach took place in 2004, as the academia and the Municipality of Älvdalen joined hands with Ulum Dalska. Marking its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Ulum Dalska, Uppsala University and the Municipality of Älvdalen co-organized a conference about Elfdalian. The conference was an eye-opener for the academic world, as Elfdalian had thus far been marginalized due to its classification as merely one of the many Swedish dialects and due to the general negligible interest for the traditional dialects among scholars. With the help of the conference, as well as the course in Elfdalian in the following year, many scholars became aware of the peculiarities, which characterize Elfdalian. Two additional conferences about Elfdalian were arranged thanks to this triple cooperation, in 2008 in Älvdalen, and in 2015 in Copenhagen (the latter also with the cooperation of the universities of Copenhagen and Tromsø). The 2015 conference drew significant media attention, both within and outside Scandinavia, where Elfdalian was often referred to as the 'Viking forest language'. A scholarly volume about Elfdalian morphology and syntax was published by Bentzen et al. (2015), as well as two PhD theses about Elfdalian (by Garbacz (2010) and Melerska (2011)), as well as one PhD thesis partially about Elfdalian (by Karlander (2017)).

Besides research, several scholars, as myself, became engaged in the revitalization efforts and in the public debate about the status of Elfdalian. Together with Gunnar Nyström, I arranged and taught the first academic course in Elfdalian ever, in 2015 (arranged by Uppsala University and held in Övdaln), with the assistance of Ulum Dalska and the municipality. The compendium we wrote for this course (Nyström & Sapir, 2005) contained some newly written texts in Classical Elfdalian, and likewise simplified old stories told by native Elfdalian speakers, collected and compiled by Nyström. Moreover, it contained glossaries,

grammatical explanations and exercises. The compendium is an open online resource today and is still used at various Elfdalian language courses in Övdaln. Thus, old corpora are 'recycled' and 'returned' to the local community for the sake of revitalization. Moreover, texts and sound files from the compendium are in these days being used to construct Minecraft in Elfdalian, aiming to revive the language among the children in a playful way. This marks a shift in the approach of the academia towards Elfdalian and the Elfdalian speech community, where the language and its speakers are not merely considered a source for data collection, but rather as a group of persons with needs and rights to speak their own mother tongue and to reclaim at least a part of what has been lost through the years. Through conducting projects together, both parties can be seen as winners.

Further, since 2005, Ulum Dalska, the municipality and representatives from the academia (with myself as a coordinator) have been engaged in talks with the Swedish authorities and the Secretariat of the Council of Europe aiming towards a recognition of Elfdalian as a regional or minority language in Sweden according to the ECMRL (European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages) (European Charter, 2007). In its decision from 2006, the Municipality of Älvdalen obliged itself to "[...] enhance, support and participate in Ulum Dalska's work to have Elfdalian recognized as a regional or minority language according to ECMRL [...]" (Älvdalens kommun, 2006). In 2016, Ulum Dalska and *Språkförsvaret* ('The Language Defense', a grass-root, Stockholm-based language association) published a joint petition in favor of a language status for Elfdalian, which was handed to the Committee on the Constitution at the Swedish Parliament. *Språkförsvaret* has been taking part in the public and political debate about Elfdalian since 2015. The Council of Europe has urged the Swedish Authorities several times to clarify the status of the language in cooperation with the speakers, so far with little effect. In 2016, Elfdalian acquired an ISO language code by SIL International, regarding it as both an *ausbau* and *abstand* language. In the correspondence prior to the granting of the code, Swedish authorities uttered its rejection to the arguments raised those favoring such a code (by Ulum Dalska, the Municipality of Älvdalen, *Språkförsvaret* and linguists). The languages thus far recognized according to ECMRL in Sweden all belong to the recognized ethnic minorities, and all recognized ethnic minorities in Swedish have recognized languages, although the ECMRL itself does not apply necessarily on recognized ethnic minorities (cf. Karlander 2016).

In 2016, the Municipality of Älvdalen decided to support Elfdalian language skills among children in Övdaln. To this end, the municipality's children and education department was required to offer Elfdalian language instruction to the preschool pedagogical staff

as well as to develop Elfdalian language resources on preschool level. For the long term, the department was likewise required to create favorable conditions for the daily usage of Elfdalian in elementary school. The declared ambition was that at least 30% of the students, who would finish elementary school by 2030, should be fluent in Elfdalian. In the same year, the municipality opened the first ever Elfdalian-language preschool department (Älvdalens kommun, 2016a, 2016b) at *Tallkotten* preschool, where some of the children have Elfdalian as their first language. Two of the preschool pedagogues took part in the Elfdalian summer course in 2017. Thanks to Ulum Dalska, elderly speakers of Elfdalian started frequenting the Elfdalian-language preschool once a week since the mid-2017, scaffolding the language development among the children (Ulla Schütt through telephone communication). Elfdalian has been offered several times as a voluntary choice subject for students in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In the fall term of 2017, 54 students out of a total of 205 students of these grades in Övdaln chose Elfdalian as an optional subject (Björn Rehnström through personal communication). Thus, we can see a positive shift towards Elfdalian on the municipal level, but not yet on the state level.

Since 2009, Ulum Dalska and *Älvdalens Besparingssskog* ('*The Saving Forest Corporation of Älvdalen*') have been awarding a *Language Grant* to school children in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, who could prove being fluent in Elfdalian through an exam. The current chairman of Ulum Dalska, Funk-Emil Eriksson, was himself awarded the language grant in 2009. As was the case with some of the other children, the grant incited him to resume speaking Elfdalian after having lost it in a preschool with a majority of Swedish-speakers, and in spite of growing up with Elfdalian at home (Sveriges radio (2017); Funk-Emil Eriksson through personal communication).

Besides the actors mentioned above, other organizations and private persons contribute to the revitalization efforts in different ways, e.g. by donating funds, writing or translating literature, songs, plays, musicals in or into Elfdalian, as well as performing with such material. Moreover, there are school employees or private persons, who inspire and encourage parents and children to learn or to use Elfdalian. Until 2016, Bengt Åkerberg held Elfdalian language courses in Övdaln and in Stockholm. Formerly a teacher of Swedish and German and a native of Övdaln, Åkerberg learned the classical version of the language from his grandparents and advocated the preservation of that complex inflectional version of the language of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, partially documented in the form of recordings of his grandfather (born in 1863) in the 1950s. The grammatical knowledge he accumulated from these recordings constituted the basis for the grammar he taught in his language courses between 1998 and 2016 and put in print with the assistance of Gunnar Nyström and in

cooperation with Ulum Dalska (Åkerberg, 2012) (*Älvdalsk grammatik i bokform*, 2010).

In 2014, texts written by Frost-Anders were discovered in Övdaln. Frost-Anders was a worker at the local porphyry grindery. His texts (diary and others) date back to the 1940's and are mainly written in Classical Elfdalian (some are in Swedish). A part of his Elfdalian-language diaries, published and commented on by Åkerberg et al. (2017), constitutes the longest prose ever produced in Classical Elfdalian and can hence be used as an important source for future language revitalization, especially in the production of new written Elfdalian prose.

Teacher Ruth 'Puck' Olsson and journalist Björn Rehnström are both outsiders, who migrated to Övdaln from other parts of Sweden, and who contributed to the revitalization of Elfdalian. Olsson moved to Övdaln in 1953 and had to learn Elfdalian in order to communicate with her students at the local school, as they did not understand her Swedish. With their help, she learned Elfdalian. In 1987, she rewarded the community with the first ever Elfdalian-language children's book, *Mumunes Masse 'Grandma's Masse/cat'* and *Mier um Masse 'More about Masse/the cat'* (Olsson, 1987a; 1987b). The books were meant as study material for Elfdalian and, as Olsson herself related, when she once read her first book to one of her classes, the children remained seated even after the bell had rung, until she finished reading the whole book. Hearing a story in their own mother-tongue was a new and pleasant experience for those children (Carlsson & Corbin, 2005). Olsson's books, the first of which was translated into no less than 41 Swedish dialects, were a big success. Rehnström, who moved to Övdaln in 1977, launched a number of campaigns and series about and in Elfdalian in *Mora Tidning* from the 1980s onwards and published several children's books in Elfdalian (e.g. Rehnström (2006)). Whereas Olsson's lexicon and grammar reflect the contemporary, colloquial Elfdalian of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Rehnström's books, proofread by Bengt Åkerberg, were published in Classical Elfdalian.

Elfdalian is more frequently heard and seen in Tjyörtjbynn today compared with thirty years ago. It is likewise visible on road names, street signs, signs both outside and inside shops nowadays.

### **Standardization and Orthography**

Languages or vernaculars in their 'natural' form (i.e. without language planning) are dynamic, as they are characterized by regional and generational variation. In order to make a language or vernacular functional in a modern literary society and in the written form, a standardization is necessary. Through the standardization of grammar, orthography, vocabulary and sometimes pronunciation, the speech community acquires a more uniform way of communication. A standard orthography provides moreover an easy access

to written material and eases written communication among the speech community. Further, a standardization enables the unification of smaller varieties (e.g. on the village level) under one umbrella (e.g. on the parish level). A language standardization often contributes to a higher prestige among the speech community and beyond. Empowering the language and its speakers on the one hand, a standardization may come at the cost of variation on the other. Ulum Dalska has been mainly engaged with preserving Classical Elfdalian (through grammars and courses), a variety of Elfdalian with a well-documented grammar, albeit not standardized. A standard Elfdalian orthography was established in 2005 by *Rådjärum*, the Elfdalian Language Council, but has still not gained overall acceptance.

The Elfdalian variant of runes was used in Övdaln longer than anywhere else in Northern Europe, until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conveying texts in Elfdalian and Swedish (see also Sapir (2005)). The first written records in Elfdalian preserved to this day are from the 17th century and consist of an inscription on a chair with Runic letters (perhaps even earlier than that), a passage in a theatre piece (see Björklund, 1956), as well as wedding poems. In the journal *Skansvakten* ('*The Mound Watch*'), published in Övdaln since 1917, we find texts in Elfdalian by different authors and in different genres. Due to the considerable differences between the Elfdalian and the Swedish phonetic and phonological systems, as well as the lack of a standard Elfdalian orthography, writers used their individual spelling systems, often reflecting their regional pronunciation and their individual attempts to render it through Swedish orthography.

Steensland (1986) was the first to attempt to create a standard orthography for Elfdalian, used in the different editions of his dictionaries and other publications. Besides the Swedish letters, he introduced the ogonek diacritic to symbolize vowel nasality<sup>11</sup>. Steensland's orthography reflected the language in the central villages of Övdaln and was more oriented towards the pronunciation than towards etymology.

Åkerberg made likewise an attempt to introduce a standard Elfdalian orthography. In 1999, he began to give Elfdalian language courses, simultaneously trying to revitalize the classical grammar system. In 2000, Åkerberg translated, together with a working group, a novel by Kerstin Ekman *Hunden* ('*The Dog*') from Swedish into Elfdalian – *Rattsjin* (Ekman, 2000). In the novel, in his course material and grammar, Åkerberg introduced a highly phonetic orthography, where diacritics and special letters were used generously in order to reflect the pronunciation of words in their varying phonosyntactic context as accurately as possible

<sup>11</sup> This mark already employed in the Swedish Dialect Alphabet, in turn, inspired by the denotation of nasal vowels in the Polish alphabet.

(e.g. mutation of vowels or consonants). Besides ogonek representing nasal vowels, Åkerberg also included <Ðð> to rendering the fricative dental stop in his alphabet<sup>12</sup>. The orthography was conceived by many speakers as too complex for reading or writing. Moreover, the orthography had the disadvantage of reflecting the local pronunciation of Åkerberg's home village, Loka.

In 2004, Ulum Dalska approached me with the urge to establish and chair a new Elfdalian language council, whose principal aim would be to create a standard Elfdalian orthography. The council was to consist moreover of Östen Dahl, Gunnar Nyström, Lars Steensland and Bengt Åkerberg. The council founded in the same year decided to call itself *Rådjärum, älvdalska språkrådet* ('*Let us Consult, the Elfdalian Language Council*'). The standard orthography was supposed to be regionally 'neutral' in the sense that it should not reflect a certain variety. Rather, the reflection of phonological items who were common to a majority of the speakers was given a priority<sup>13</sup>. With the help of a standard Elfdalian orthography, the council argued, it would be easier to render the unique Elfdalian phonetics and phonology in a written form. The orthography was to be practical and easy to use, esthetical, departing from the Swedish keyboard, without too many diacritic marks, and simple to learn. Moreover, the council took previous Elfdalian orthographic traditions into consideration, e.g. preserving the ogonek to mark vowel nasality and the letter <Ðð> for the fricative dental stop. However, it decided to exclude further diacritics which do not exist in the Swedish alphabet. Although all Elfdalian speakers master Swedish, as well, the council decided upon two norms that harmonized with Danish and Norwegian, as well as with Åkerberg's orthography, rather than with the Swedish orthography: <kk> to reflect /k ɫ / (cf. Swedish <ck>), and <ks> to reflect /ks/ (cf. to Swedish <x>). Further, the council held that the new orthography should be as transparent as possible, but that words should change spelling as little as possible in the phrase, in spite of the dynamic nature of Elfdalian phonotax within the phrase. Thus, vowel apocope was to be marked, but not consonant apocope, e.g. *bara + dâ* ('*only + then*'), pronounced *ba-dâ* in a phrase, was to be rendered according to the new orthography as <*bar dâ*>. Which letters should be marked in writing when muted and which not was to be learned by rules (Rådjärum, 2005).

After seven months of consultations within the council, as well as with the speech community through questionnaires and in situ meetings in Övdaln,

<sup>12</sup> This letter was otherwise used in Medieval Scandinavian texts, the Swedish Dialect Alphabet, and is likewise used in Icelandic and Faroese.

<sup>13</sup> Having said that, the regional variation of phonemes is rather small and predictable and does not cause difficulties in mutual intelligibility between the villages.

Råddjárom's standard orthography was presented to Ulum Dalska's annual meeting in March 2005, where it was approved unanimously. After the approval and the publication of the orthographical norms, some criticism was voiced, mainly from Elfdalian speakers who felt that some items in the new spelling did not coincide with their own local pronunciation. Others claimed that the orthography did not reflect the regional or generational diversity, that Elfdalian never had an orthography and that people should or could just write what they pronounced. The members of the council, not always themselves agreeing on all points, pointed out that the aim of the orthography was to render written communication in Elfdalian easy to encode and decode, not to regulate the spoken language and not to eradicate the regional variation, and that the written norm could not reflect all regional varieties. At the same time, some of the members felt that the speech community would need more time to get accustomed to the orthography, and then the introduction of the orthography to younger speakers through school would render its learning easier. In the two editions of *Lisslprinsn* (Saint-Exupéry, 2007; 2015), *The Little Prince* in Elfdalian, Råddjárom's orthography was used, as well as in Rehnström's novel *Trair byönnar frå Övdalim* (Rehnström, 2006). Having used their own orthographies in grammars and dictionaries, respectively, already before the establishment of the standard orthography, Åkerberg and Steensland did not change their orthographies according to Råddjárom's decision, but still modified them closer towards Råddjárom's standard in their later works. For a comparison between Råddjárom's and Åkerberg's orthographies, see Skrievum Dalska (<http://www.skrievum.se/dalska/skrievum.html> [Retrieved on September 13, 2017]). In my opinion, it is an advantage to empower the speech community with meta-linguistic knowledge in order to let them take part in such discussions with linguists on a more equal level. Without such knowledge, a lack of common ground between linguists and the speech community might render such discussions difficult.

A minor revival can also be observed in the domain of word formation, where some new Elfdalian words on native basis have emerged during the past few years, e.g. *Krå'yssbuotje* (lit. 'The Face Book') for 'Facebook', *weðerpuost* (lit. 'air, wind post') for 'e-mail', and *rådstemmen* (lit. 'council meeting', inspired by Icelandic *ráðstefna*) for 'conference'.

Whether these revitalization efforts will cause a reversed language shift and/or grant Elfdalian an official recognition from the Swedish authorities in the long run is by no means guaranteed, but the pessimistic views as to an imminent language death for Elfdalian may not become a reality, at least in the short term.

## Conclusions

Elfdalian language decline during the past century has manifested itself in the language system, the language domains and the number of speakers. However, thanks to community efforts, Ulum Dalska has been working to preserve and revitalize Elfdalian since 1984. The academia, the Municipality of Älvdalen and others have been cooperating with Ulum Dalska since 2004 – a clear shift from the traditional approach from the academia and from the authorities.

Today, we are witnessing several conflicting tendencies in the context of Elfdalian revitalization: whereas a new form of Elfdalian emerges among the young generation, its traditional structure becomes more common in different contexts, including the language instruction aimed for children, books and computer games. Also, some new native words emerge in the Elfdalian lexicon, which follow the traditional word formation patterns. Whereas a decline in the use of Elfdalian in the home domain has been registered on the one hand, an increased use has been registered in other domains, such as the school, literature, culture and the new digital domains, on the other. Information technology has moreover eased the diffusion of Elfdalian language material and communication within the speech community, as well as between the speech community and students and scholars outside its traditional territory. Finally, Elfdalian is more visible in the linguistic landscape in Övdal and is nowadays a source for a strong sense of pride among the speakers. The number of speakers is still on the decline and further surveys will be necessary in the coming years to register the impact of the steps taken in the past few years on the number of speakers.

Although the will of a speech community to preserve or revive a language does not always reflect their actions, the three-legged cooperation for the revival of Elfdalian between the speech community, the academia and the Municipality of Älvdalen is showing some positive results, which might help reverse the language shift in the long run. Taking into account the steps taken to revitalize Elfdalian, I feel there are good reasons to be more optimistic concerning an Elfdalian revival than e.g. Helgander (2012). An official recognition of Elfdalian as a language according to ECMRL will give the revitalization efforts an additional boost.

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