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## **Abstract**

### **Deviations or change? Traits in the Swedish of a semi-speaker in Gammalsvenskby, Ukraine**

In the study of dying or endangered languages, it is often assumed that the language of the last speakers is characterised by a high degree of linguistic reduction (cf. for instance Evans 2001). Dorian (1973) has coined the term “semi-speaker”, which has subsequently been widely used referring to last speakers, whose command of the dying language is clearly deviating from the traditional norm (a.k.a. *imperfect terminal speakers*).

In this paper I will approach the concept of language death through a close study of one semi-speaker. The case under examination is that of “Svetlana”, a speaker of the Estonian-Swedish dialect of Gammalsvenskby in Ukraine. The Gammalsvenskby community, which was founded by settlers from Dagö (Hiiumaa) in modern day Estonia in 1782, has gone through a radical language shift from Swedish to Ukrainian in the 1930's. Today, all fluent speakers of this Ukrainian Swedish dialect (approximately 10 speakers) are born in 1937 or earlier. However, during fieldwork in the village in 2011 I also met Svetlana, born in 1963, who turned out to be a semi-speaker of the dialect. Although Ukrainian is clearly her first language, Svetlana has no problems conversing in the Swedish language of her mother and father; nonetheless, her language shows clear deviations from the more traditional norm of all other remaining speakers.

In my paper I will proceed from a comparison between the traditional dialect, such as described by Karlgren (1953 [1906]) and Man'kov (2010a,b; 2011a,b) and spoken by other, fluent speakers in my recordings on the one hand, and the clearly different grammar of Svetlana's Swedish on the other. Clearly, it cannot be denied that Svetlana's Swedish shows great influence from her Ukrainian first language. There are, however, many traits in her “reduced” Swedish, which can also be related to variation among the fluent speakers and the structure of the traditional dialect. The argument put forward is that the deviations in the language of the so-called imperfect terminal speakers in dying languages do not necessarily differ very much from language change under more “normal” circumstances, apart from the rate of change.

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