

A qualitative analysis of variation in Meänkieli

Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi (Uppsala University, University College London) and Rogier Blokland (Uppsala University)

Meänkieli is a minoritised Finno-Ugric language traditionally spoken in Northern Sweden. It is closely related to northern Finnish dialects and Kven in Norway. Meänkieli has been one of the official national minority languages of Sweden alongside Finnish, the Sámi languages, Romani Chib, and Yiddish since 2000, and is currently being reclaimed and revitalised. Sometimes Meänkieli is grouped together with the Finnish dialect spoken on the other side of the Torne River in Finland, while at other times its status as a national language of Sweden is emphasised (e.g. meanmaa.net vs Valijärvi et al. 2022). Whilst in Sweden the status of the language is undisputed, in Finland such recognition does not appear to be widely accepted yet. Paunonen (2018) does, however, acknowledge the fact that the variety has started to diverge from Finnish dialects.

This study focuses on variation in contemporary Meänkieli. Our research questions are: What linguistic variation is there in both written and spoken Meänkieli today? Can we (or do we need to) draw a clear line between the language Meänkieli in Sweden and the western Torne subgroup of northern Finnish which is sometimes subsumed under Meänkieli? And if we do so, on the basis of what linguistic (and/or non-linguistic) features? What is typical of the language spoken and written in Sweden vs the variety used in Finland? Could the dialect spoken in Finland and Kven be brought closer together?

Our data comes from recent fieldwork data, radio/TV programmes, websites, published literature, and social media. The variables include, Swedish loanwords, phonology (e.g. aspiration in Swedish names), morphology (e.g. dialectal features), syntax (e.g. non-finite constructions), and code-switching. The results of our qualitative analysis show a continuum from literary fiction on both sides of the border and administrative Meänkieli in Sweden to new speakers' nonstandard use of morpho-syntax as well as the symbolic use of phrases on social media. In some cases, what we call Meänkieli may contain features from standard or colloquial Finnish. We will also reflect on older recordings, discuss factors behind the variation (e.g. bilingualism, age, new speakers, Finnish family members or background, situation/context), and highlight the significance of a detailed description of the variation for ongoing revitalisation efforts.

References

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