

**“Let’s begin with the youngest!”
Minority language revitalisation through preschool**

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Background

In February 2000, Sweden ratified two Council of Europe conventions: the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. As a result, five national minorities and their languages were recognized officially: the Finns and Finnish, the Jews and Yiddish, the Roma and Romani, the Sami and the Sami language and the Tornedalians and Meänkieli. The last of the new national minority languages, Meänkieli, differed from the others in several respects. First, it had acquired language status as a result of the ratification process, while being formerly regarded as a dialect of Finnish (“Tornedalen Finnish”). Both languages had a common history beginning in the Finnish spoken widely in the northern parts of the Kingdom of Sweden until Sweden lost its eastern part to Russia in 1809. When the new border was drawn through Tornedalen, a culturally and linguistically homogenous area in the north, part of the Finnish-speakers became a minority in Sweden. On the other side of the border, Finnish-speakers became part of the majority population in what is today Finland. When nationalist policies gained momentum in Sweden in the late 1800s, Tornedalen Finnish remained the vernacular spoken in homes and the village square, while Swedish became the only language of official domains. The only exception was the Lutheran Church which has retained Finnish as one of its languages until this day in the whole country.

Throughout a century of coercive assimilation policies in Sweden, Finnish was, therefore, a low status mother tongue but also the *lingua sacra* of the Tornedalian population. When the period of overt assimilation ended in the 1970s and minority language speakers could more easily make their voices heard, a group of young Tornedalians came together and launched a linguistic and cultural revitalisation movement. In 1981, the Federation of the Swedish Tornedalians (the STR-T) was established, with the promotion of the local language and culture defined as its central task. From the beginning, the STR-T took a clear stand on the question of which language should be regarded as the “language of the Tornedalians”: “Tornedalian Finnish” as opposed to standard Finnish was chosen as the language to be revitalised, and the name used for it within the Tornedalian movement was Meänkieli (literally “Our Language”). The reasoning behind this choice was that the local Finnish variety had developed in its own way in the Tornedalian villages, without much influence from the language standardisation and development taking place on the Finnish side of the border, and gradually it had grown apart enough to be considered a language in its own right, i.e. Meänkieli.

After a couple of decades of hard work, the revitalisation movement now (2005) seems to have reached a large part of the adult Tornedalian population and the current question is how to make the younger generations part of it as well. Minority language support through school education is often seen as crucial (Edwards, 1985; Fishman, 1991) and in the new Swedish minority policy starting in 2000, school education *is* given some attention but measures promoting strong bilingual or minority language medium programmes for long term language maintenance are lacking. The evident shortcomings as regards support for languages of national minorities in the field of education were also a central point of critique on the part of the Council of Europe following the first monitoring round after the Swedish ratification of the two European conventions¹. The few existing examples of bilingual education in Sweden are almost exclusively found in the so-called independent schools, i.e. schools which are privately run but publicly funded. The position of these schools is for the time being rather insecure as a lot of responsibility is put on the local parents and there are examples of municipalities actively resisting the establishment and running of such schools. What dominates in the way of minority language support in the Swedish school is the so-called mother tongue instruction, which is, one or two weekly lessons in the mother tongue of the child in an otherwise Swedish medium school (e.g. Boyd, 2001).

In Tornedalen, there is only one independent school, The Kangos Culture and Ecology School, with some instruction in and of Meänkieli (see Huss, 1999). In a number of municipal schools, Meänkieli is taught as

¹ The report of the Swedish government on the state of the national minorities and their languages and the critique expressed by the Expert Committee for the Charter are available at <http://www.coe.int/minlang>

a subject one or two hours a week. The patterns of minority language competence within the Tornedalian population (estimated to comprise some 70,000-80,000 individuals) are very typical for endangered languages: the older the people, the better the language competence and the younger the worse. There is no language census in Sweden, neither are there any other statistics available as to the number of speakers of any languages. Nevertheless, it is obvious that language shift is taking place in Tornedalen, resulting in a situation where most children no longer speak Meänkieli at home or with their peers. Given this situation, traditional bilingual education would be difficult to apply from the start; rather it would require the use of an immersion model where Swedish speaking children would learn Meänkieli through a special pedagogy applied to the Tornedalian situation. In the absence of such a model, many parents see the current mother tongue support model with one or two weekly lessons as an adequate solution.

In Tornedalen, history is still very much present and as a heritage from the period of overt assimilation, the attitudes of part of the population towards the local language and culture have long been mixed or sometimes even hostile. When initiatives have been taken to strengthen the local language with the help of the school, they have met with strong support, but sometimes also with strong opposition on the part of some of the parents. Some elderly people who have themselves suffered from an assimilatory school system and from prejudices on the part of the majority society, find the new interest in the local language and culture painful, like ripping open old wounds (Huss, 1999). Recently, however, attitudes have changed and in many schools instruction in Meänkieli or Finnish is offered today as part of the curriculum which deals with instruction in local culture. These initiatives remained non-mandatory for a long time and only in 1999 was the first attempt taken to introduce instruction in Meänkieli as a compulsory subject in the local curriculum for primary schools.

The Pajala school language debate 1999-2001

The municipality of Pajala located very near the Arctic Circle, on the north eastern border of Sweden, is part of the core area of Finnish where the language has been spoken for many centuries, in addition to Sami and later on also to Swedish. At present, there are 7,200 inhabitants in Greater Pajala, with some 30% of them living in the municipality centre. Until the 1960s most people in Pajala worked in agriculture or in the forest industry. In the 1970s, the municipality began losing inhabitants and became known as an area from which large numbers of young people were moving southwards, to study or to work in Stockholm or other larger cities, leaving only the elderly population behind. In the wake of the new minority policy in Sweden, the Tornedalian revitalisation movement began to challenge this tradition through cultural and educational efforts of various kinds. As new cultural events and also employment possibilities emerge on the Tornedalian scene, it is not as self-evident as before that young people prefer not to return to Tornedalen when they have finished their studies or worked for some time in other parts of Sweden.

The language debate in Pajala in 1999-2000 is, however, a good illustration of the sensitivity of the language question in Tornedalen. The debate started during late autumn 1999, just before the Swedish parliament passed a decision acknowledging five national minority groups and languages in Sweden. It continued during the spring of 2000 when the Swedish ratifications of the European conventions mentioned above entered into force. It began in November 15, 1999, when the Pajala municipal council stated that one of the aims of the comprehensive school in the municipality of Pajala was to enable all pupils to “read and write simple texts in Meänkieli” by the time they left school. The reaction from non-Meänkieli circles came quickly in the form of an appeal against the decision that was lodged with the county administrative court by a private person who also initiated a petition and gathered more than 1,000 signatures against the new policy – a considerable number in a municipality with less than 8,000 inhabitants. Following this, the municipal council took a further decision and made an amendment to the policy; the original aim to teach Meänkieli to comprehensive school pupils remained, but now it was to cover *70 percent* of the pupils only. In 2003, the issue was again discussed by the municipal council and a new decision to increase the percentage to *80* was taken. Since then, the question of “compulsory Meänkieli” has not attracted the attention of the media and instruction in Meänkieli in schools seems, for the time being (2005), to be a more or less uncontroversial issue.

Special issues in the revitalisation of Meänkieli

Although the presence of Meänkieli in school is nowadays largely accepted, language revitalisation faces some specific problems attached to the Tornedalian context. The most significant of them is the already mentioned age distribution of fluent Meänkieli speakers. Meänkieli came to be regarded as the “language of the old” because parents were formerly not supposed to pass it on to the next generation and many adults and elderly people got into the habit of addressing children and young people/adolescents in Swedish only. This meant that the young lost contact with the language in spite of the fact that it was, and still is, frequently used among older people. Consequently, the pupils in Tornedalian schools are mostly monolingual Swedish speakers, and Meänkieli instruction has to begin from scratch.

Another difficulty is of a linguistic nature. Meänkieli as opposed to standard Finnish, has a strong symbolic value for many people. It is regarded as the bearer of the genuine Tornedalian culture. It is also true that it has many specific traits owing to the long period of separate development it has gone through. Nevertheless, the two varieties, Finnish and Meänkieli, are largely mutually intelligible and may be used in the same conversation without difficulty. Various forms of Finnish and Meänkieli form a continuum and it is sometimes difficult to draw a line between the two to decide where the one ends and the other begins. This linguistic situation is further complicated by the tradition of frequent *poikkinainti* (“cross-marriage”) between Swedish Tornedalians and Finns from Finland which tends to have linguistic consequences, promoting spoken varieties nearer the Finnish end of the continuum.

For school education, the lack of a standardised written language is also an issue. Terminology in various domains where Meänkieli (or “Tornedalian Finnish”) was not traditionally used, is also lacking. Unlike Sami and Finnish in Sweden, Meänkieli does not have the support of a special language council, which would develop terminology, give advice in linguistic matters etc. There are currently plans to establish such a council for Meänkieli, possibly in connection with a planned “Language Council of Sweden”, an authority which would cater for the care and promotion of Swedish as well as immigrant languages, minority languages, the Swedish Sign Language² etc. For the time being, however, Meänkieli teachers and others working with the written form of the language, have to manage without such support. Consequently, most materials used in teaching Meänkieli are produced by individual teachers themselves.

Meänkieli action research in Pajala preschools

In 2003, a project financed by the municipality was launched to revitalise Meänkieli from the “bottom up” in two respects: the project was to target the youngest of the Tornedalian population, namely children in preschool, and an effort would be made to engage their parents, grandparents and the local community as well in the revitalisation efforts. It was recognised that all participants would need to cooperate and complement each other if significant results were to be achieved (see Vincent, 2000).

The manager of the project, and indeed the creator of the whole idea, was Astrid Kruukka, herself a Tornedalian who had heard Meänkieli spoken in her home. Astrid’s parents had spoken Swedish to their children while keeping Meänkieli between themselves and Swedish was established as the language used among the children. Only between Astrid and her grandmother was Meänkieli used in a natural and self-evident way. Later on, Astrid’s interest in Tornedalian culture was born, firstly through her participation in Tornedalian dance and song groups working with local musical traditions. As time went by, she became more and more involved in the linguistic side of the Tornedalian movement and started to promote Meänkieli while being employed by the municipality of Pajala for various tasks. In 2003, she received funding for two years and launched her project “Meänkieli Action Research for a Bilingual Preschool”.

² This authority was one of the proposals included in the commission report SOU 2002:27 *Mål i mun. Förslag till handlingsprogram för svenska språket. Betänkande av kommittén för svenska språket* [Proposal for an action programme for Swedish. Commission report by the Committee for the Swedish Language] (Accessible at the website of the Swedish Ministry of Culture: <http://www.kultur.regeringen.se/propositionernmm/SOU/index.htm>).

As stated in her project programme, the aim was to achieve “active bilingualism” in the preschools of the municipality of Pajala. “Preschool” in Sweden comprises day-care for 0-5 year old children. From the age of 6, the children are transferred to the “grade 0” usually located in the same premises as the school where they will start in grade 1 the following year.

The action research was defined as covering among other things the following elements:

- The project manager in cooperation with the preschool work team would initiate a plan for development
- Those involved would be invited to participate continuously and to influence the development of activities
- All the planning would be done with consideration to the conditions prevailing for the staff and the children
- New experiences would be allowed to influence the planning so that it will be possible to introduce improvements continually
- Mutual discussions would be held to decide how the follow up should be carried out and how possible changes could be pin-pointed

Under the heading “Preconditions and methods”, the following points were included:

- All members of the work team would have to approve of the idea of (participating in) action research
- The parents of the children in the preschool group would be kept informed and invited to participate
- The project manager would participate actively in the work of the work-team
- Planning would be done for a couple of years ahead
- The work team in the preschool together with the project manager and parents would make study visits to other bilingual preschools
- Staff and parents would be offered a course in Meänkieli if there was a need and if there was interest in such a course

In addition, a language researcher (the present author) was affiliated with the project as a consultant.

The first year

The bulk of the planning was done by Astrid Kruukka herself, with some assistance from an “advisory board” consisting of the headmasters of the preschools, local politicians as well as the research consultant. The first task was to send the project programme to all the preschools in Pajala municipality and to ask the staff to pass on the information to parents. The aim of this was to find a preschool class where both the staff and the parents were one hundred percent in favour of participating in the “Action Research for a Bilingual Preschool” project. Finally, not only one but two kindergarten classes were singled out, one in the “Snickaren” (‘the carpenter’) preschool in the municipality centre of Pajala, and the other in “Tallkotten” (‘pine cone’) preschool in a small village called Korpilombolo within the same municipality. These two kindergarten classes thus became the contexts for the action research project.

Astrid started the project by sending a questionnaire to the parents to gather background information about the families, details of language use at home and the parents’ wishes as to the outcome of the project. The results showed that most of the children involved (seventeen in Snickaren and ten in Tallkotten) all lived in fairly similar language situations.

Most parents had grown up in the municipality of Pajala and were now 30-40 years old. Almost all the children had at least one parent who knew (some) Meänkieli and a couple of them knew also or only standard Finnish (depending on whether they had studied Finnish later in life or had emigrated from Finland). Most of the parents had spoken only or mostly Swedish with their own parents but they still

reported that they *understood* Meänkieli well or fairly well. Somewhat fewer reported that they were able to *speak* the language well or even fairly well and several of them pointed out that they did not speak it at all. A few of them had had some instruction of Meänkieli/Finnish in school or had studied it later on. In their current homes, the parents spoke mostly Swedish or both languages with each other, while most of them spoke only Swedish with their children and the rest mostly Swedish and very little Meänkieli or Finnish. There was even one family with a trilingual situation, Finland-Finnish and Russian being the native languages of the parents and Swedish being used outside the home.

The Meänkieli competence of the children as estimated by the parents was very low; the children usually understood or could produce isolated words in Meänkieli. Meänkieli was often spoken in the families when relatives came to visit and some parents reported that they had asked relatives, often the grandparents, to speak Meänkieli with the children. Most parents sometimes followed radio and TV broadcasts in Meänkieli. There is some very limited media production in Meänkieli and the question posed to the parents was whether they listened to/watched all the available programmes or only some of them. The parents also stated that they did not read books or papers in Meänkieli or children's books in Meänkieli aloud to their children. There are about 30 books written in Meänkieli, many of them books for young children. There is also a bilingual Swedish-Meänkieli cultural magazine and Meänkieli columns in a bilingual Swedish-Finnish weekly newspaper and a daily Finnish newspaper, both published in Sweden. The reluctance of the parents to make use of all this could perhaps be explained by the fact that Meänkieli only recently became a language used to produce literature of various kinds; earlier it survived almost solely as a spoken vernacular while the written language of the Tornedalians was Swedish. The only exceptions were religious publications of various kinds published also in Finnish according to the tradition of the Lutheran Church in Sweden. The scarcity of publications in Meänkieli and the tradition of only reading and writing in Swedish in Tornedalen are still obstacles to spreading the use of written Meänkieli within the Tornedalian population.

One of the questions in the preliminary questionnaire sent to the parents read: "Could you as parents think of cooperating with the preschool in developing (the children's) Meänkieli for instance by using certain words and phrases at home?" Almost all parents answered positively, only one was against it and a few parents answered "maybe". When asked what kind of result the parents expected from the action research project, most parents mentioned better linguistic skills. One parent replied: "[I wish] that my child would be able to communicate in Tornedalian Finnish feeling safe and proud and would learn to understand that there are many people in this area who know the language". Another wrote: "We [parents] would like our children to understand and speak a little Meänkieli. Our dream is that both we and our children would learn it."³

The question which led to a number of different answers was: "In which contexts in society do you think it can be a positive thing to know Meänkieli?" Several parents mentioned contacts with elderly people and social contacts in general in Tornedalen. One parent emphasised the role of Meänkieli as a marker of identity: "[Using Meänkieli] you are one of us! As the language is still there, the ability to speak it leads to richer and easier encounters with those who still use it in everyday life. Meänkieli is also the bearer of our own culture and a bridge over the border. It helps us understand the history of our municipality." Meänkieli as a merit on the labour market was mentioned by several parents, as was Meänkieli as a starting point for learning or using standard Finnish. Competence in Meänkieli was also seen as generally enriching; one parent remarked: "You can always draw advantages from knowing several languages."

With the help of the information gathered through the questionnaire, Astrid composed a scheme of activities consisting of weekly visits to both preschool groups and some information evenings for parents and staff. The frequent visits to the preschools and the programme Astrid developed for language learning was meant to inspire the staff and gradually to give them the tools to work on their own on Meänkieli and to develop their own routines. One of the new activities introduced was to teach the children songs and

³ This quote, as well as all the other quotes in this chapter were originally written in Swedish but have been translated into English by the author. The Meänkieli or Finnish words used by some parents below are given in italics in their original form and are also translated into English.

rhymes in Meänkieli, write them down and send them to the parents to be practised at home as well, to have them printed on plate mats and beautifully decorated by the children themselves and finally to hang them on the walls at the preschool and send to the homes. The staff also developed a routine of noting down everyday situations where Meänkieli was used, discussed or involved in some way in a notebook kept handy in the playroom. This made some very interesting reading for the parents who could read the notes when visiting the preschool.

Information on the project as well as teaching materials were also made available through the medium of “Tema Modersmål”⁴, a website started and administered by the Swedish Agency for Education. The website was created to function as a link between teachers of various mother tongues in Sweden and an information bank to be used by teachers, pupils, parents and other interested people. Astrid participated in the development of the Meänkieli page and made all her teaching materials available there.

As the project presupposed a strong interest on the part of the parents and, in the long run, also grandparents, other relatives and the local community, parent-focused activities were considered very important and Astrid was curious to know how actively the parents were actually willing to participate if needed. A meeting with the consultant researcher drew rather large groups of parents and staff in both preschools while only a couple of parents came to a “language evening” organized with a teacher of Meänkieli. As was also evident from the questionnaires, many of the parents felt that they lived busy lives and it was difficult to find time and energy to participate in language lessons, especially as many parents felt that they already knew Meänkieli. What was appreciated was the routine of sending the songs, rhymes and phrases used in the preschool to the parents – a follow-up questionnaire at the end of the first year confirmed this and also revealed that the parents wanted to have more material of this kind. Some parents also asked for practical advice about bilingual upbringing, and suggestions for strengthening Meänkieli at home.

Another way of activating the parents used by Astrid was the “language diary”. Like the teaching staff, the parents were asked to keep a diary for one week at the end of the first project year, and to write down all episodes at home when Meänkieli was used, discussed or commented upon. The diaries revealed once again that the rhymes and songs in Meänkieli were very popular among the children. Even the children who otherwise hardly ever used Meänkieli or Finnish seemed to enjoy them. One parent wrote:

“Monday: At breakfast, Fanny says some Finnish words, for instance *paperi* [paper], *vettä* [water], *päälä* [on top of]. Fanny recites the rhyme *The cock and the egg* and pulls faces when mummy has Casper in her arms.

Tuesday: Fanny recites the rhyme *Milk, meat and potatoes* when she is putting on her clothes to go out.

Thursday: The rhyme *Isikon, tisikon* we hear when Fanny is putting on her clothes.”

Some parents quote long bilingual conversations with a lot of codeswitching and metalinguistic questions like “What does that mean in Swedish?”, “How do you say that in Meänkieli?” One parent had noted down that the whole family including the siblings of the preschool child had repeatedly discussed the Finnish and Meänkieli names of various animals during car-rides. In some notes, one can feel that the parents are really making an effort to stimulate their children to speak Meänkieli. One of them writes:

“Thursday: Mummy calls to Ellen: *Ellen tule!* [Ellen, come here!] Ellen answers: Why? Later on, mummy says: *Ellen, ota kengät pois* [Ellen, take off your shoes!] Ellen understands and does it!”.

“Sunday: Today Daddy has spoken Finnish to Ellen. She says once: Stop speaking like that! Daddy believes that she understands a lot (simple phrases and words). When Daddy speaks Finnish, she starts playing with the language. She keeps mixing Finnish words and Swedish baby talk and seems to enjoy it very much.”

⁴ <http://modersmal.skolutveckling.se/meankieli/>

Some parents seem to be worried at having nothing to report. One of them writes:

“Monday: And she who usually always speaks [in Meänkieli]... said nothing (at least when we were listening)! And we didn’t try to influence her! Tuesday: Nothing spontaneous today either...there is something funny here! Wednesday: At last! Many, many songs...She also said: *Saanko mie nuola?* [May I lick?] (the bowl where we made the dough for a cake)”.

At the end of the first year, Astrid sent a new questionnaire to the parents to find out what they thought about the project. The answers showed that so far the project had been a success. One parent wrote: “The project has been very good indeed and the children think that using another language is fun. I think this is largely because the language has been introduced through rhymes and other pleasant things.” Some of the answers reflect a change in attitudes towards Meänkieli among the children: “The project has raised the interest of the children in Meänkieli. They ask us *How do you say that in Meänkieli?* Through the preschool, it has become legitimate to speak Finnish. Now the children are proud to know Finnish words.” All parents except one saw no need for improvement; the project was functioning well. The one exception was a parent who was afraid that other kinds of popular activities, like “planting flowers”, had been reduced to make room for language activities. Almost all parents stated that their children understood more Meänkieli after the first year of the project than they had done before; one parent claimed that they could no longer use Meänkieli as the secret language between parents! Almost all parents also stated that their children had begun to use more Meänkieli than they had done previously, mostly they still used isolated words but some also used sentences and many children sang and rhymed in Meänkieli. Most children spoke to their parents about the project, most often about the visits Astrid made to the preschool; the children greatly enjoyed them and did not like to miss them.

As for the parents themselves, the change was less significant. Most of them seemed to focus solely on the achievements of their children and did not make special efforts to improve their own Meänkieli.

For the second preschool year, 2004-2005, Astrid planned a couple of new activities in addition to the ones already used in the preschools. One of them was to apply the “language nest” model and engage elderly fluent speakers of Meänkieli, preferable grandparents of some of the project children, in a systematic way in the work of the preschool. The language nest model goes back to an innovation of the Maori in New Zealand called “Kohanga Reo”, (e.g. Fishman, 1991). The main principle behind it is to recruit linguistically and culturally competent elderly people, preferably grandparents, to work in day care and to transmit the language and culture to the children, thus forming a “bridge” over the already assimilated into Swedish parent generation. Here the role of the parents is very important because they are in a position to easily locate willing candidates – and grandparents who have their grandchildren in the preschool are probably more inclined to volunteer. The other new initiative planned by Astrid was to inspire both the parents and the staff by doing a joint study visit to another preschool where language revitalisation was taking place possibly to a Saami or a Kven⁵ preschool in Norway. During the visit, the staff and the parents were to have the opportunity of getting to know each other better, to meet their Norwegian counterparts and to exchange ideas and solutions to everyday problems in a revitalisation situation. The final aim of the second year was to make sure that the language work would not be interrupted when the project ended but would continue in some form both in the preschool and at home.

Summing up and looking ahead: Is “Action Research for a Bilingual Preschool” a tool for language revitalisation?

In autumn 2004, the situation in the *Snickaren* and *Tallkotten* preschools was as follows: there was a unanimous feeling among parents and staff that the project was a success and should be continued. The children seemed to have learnt some Meänkieli and the language had become a self-evident part of everyday activities. However, the parents themselves mostly relied on the efforts of the preschool and did not seem to have significantly increased the use of Meänkieli at home although several of them had

⁵ The Kven are an old minority in northern Norway who speak a language very similar to Meänkieli.

expressed their appreciation of the written copies with Meänkieli songs and rhymes made available to them. A couple of parents have also expressed a wish to obtain the little booklet containing advice on bilingual upbringing which had been included in the plans for the second year of the project.

So far, Astrid's efforts to involve the parent and grandparent generations in the activities of the preschools have led to a new form of activities. Special language evenings "for all generations" took place in January 2005 and proved to be a great success. Rather than concentrating only on traditional language lessons for parents and personnel as the original plan was, Astrid has arranged in both preschools special evening programmes totally in Meänkieli in both preschools where everybody could find something interesting to do. She describes the evening held before Christmas evening as follows:

"I myself first took care of the mums and dads, grandmas and granddads in a big adjoining room. Some teachers had translated the text in the Christmas carol *Tip tap* into Meänkieli and we went through it together, discussing whether the words sounded right, how you would write them correctly, how you would say them in Finland-Finnish and such things. After that we practised singing the song together a couple of times and I told them that we were going to sing it for the children and that the preschool personnel would make a little theatre of it, dramatizing the events in the song. After that we played a kind of word Bingo game in Meänkieli. There were two teams competing with each other and that really turned out to be very engaging! Afterwards we all returned to the room where the children had in the meantime been working on other things. First, they enacted for us the story of Billy Goats Gruff, *De tre bockarna Bruse*, which they had turned into a little theatre play and then it was our turn to sing and to show our own Christmas song play for the children. After that we all sang some more, had something to eat and generally had a good time. And there were *so* many people coming to these evenings! That is the good thing of arranging evenings for all generations – almost everybody wants to come and join the language work when it is given in this form."

A lot of help from the parents, grandparents and the local community will be needed to reverse the Tornedalian language shift and Astrid views these kinds of events as one way of raising the status of Meänkieli in the minds of the local people, in addition to raising their language awareness.

After the second year, the project will come to an end but, according to the overall aim, support structures and willingness will have been created among the parents and staff to permit a continuation of the language work, without a formal project or project leader. One of the difficulties is that some of the preschoolers will have by then become school children and left the preschool. Already after the first year, some children left for school and some newcomers joined the two preschool groups. This meant that the new children had to be integrated into the Meänkieli activities without any introductory period. Ideally, continued and adequate support for Meänkieli should be provided for the new school children at the comprehensive school. These children are not total Meänkieli beginners anymore, while children from other preschools might be, so the task for the school will have to be to develop individually adapted mother tongue instruction in Meänkieli. Half of the answers given by parents to the final questionnaire given to parents of school beginners show that there is a wish for the school to provide that support. Those who do not express such a wish expect that interest and competence of the children to "grow naturally" after having been started in the preschool.

What has the Action Research project meant so far for the revitalization of Meänkieli in the municipality of Pajala? Is this the way to engage the whole community in language maintenance work, by beginning with the youngest and involving the parents and elderly people in the process? The number of children included in the project is very modest and the activity of the parents limited, in spite of favourable attitudes and an interest in the project among both parents and staff.

Nevertheless, from a time perspective (a couple of decades), the change in the linguistic climate in Tornedalen is stunning. While the STR-T had to fight for their cause in the early 1980s and keep discussing the legitimacy of their linguistic and cultural maintenance work with their fellow Tornedalians, few people today question it – instead it is welcomed and appreciated. Even the conflict over the

obligatory status of teaching Meänkieli in the schools of Pajala was forgotten rather soon after it had erupted and both teachers and parents presently seem to be comfortable with Meänkieli in the curriculum.

The development in Pajala is very similar to situations in many other minority communities where assimilation policies have led to a wide-spread language shift. When the generation which has become bilingual or monolingual in the majority language establishes its position in society, attitudes change, the (partially) lost language is revalorised and efforts are started to reclaim it (Crystal, 2000). The problem with this kind of development lies in the fact that the interest in the language rises precipitously when it is already almost lost, and language revitalisation therefore becomes much more cumbersome than it would have been otherwise. Crystal claims, in fact, that minority language speakers should be made aware of this very common pattern so that they can at least make their own, informed choices before it is too late. While an information campaign spreading the words of Crystal in Pajala is a possibility, efforts could also be made to spread the good practices created in Snickaren and Tallkotten to other preschools and gradually to establish them as a standard ingredient in Tornedalian preschools. Beginning with the youngest, engaging the older generations and raising the profile of Meänkieli in everyday life in Pajala could be a way of grappling with both minority language learning and cultural democracy in Swedish Tornedalen.

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