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**Meänkieli in Sweden:  
An Overview of a  
Language in Context**



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During the initial stage of the research project ELDIA (European Language Diversity for All) in 2010, "structured context analyses" of each speaker community at issue were prepared. These context analyses will act as a starting point for further deepened research by linguists, sociologists and lawyers. Thus, they will form the basis of further case-specific reports and the comparative report which will be the main outcome of the whole project. However, as these will be available for interested readers only at the end of the project, we wanted to publish shorter versions summarising our work so far already at this stage, thus providing up-to-date information for both the academic community and stakeholder groups. This paper, based on the context analysis by Laura Arola, Niina Kunnas, and Birger Winsa, gives a brief and up-to-date overview of the status of and research about Meänkieli in Sweden.

As all papers appearing in the series Working Papers in European Language Diversity, these context analyses have been subject to an anonymous peer-reviewing process. Whenever the present document is referred to, due reference to the author and the ELDIA project should be made. For more information about the ELDIA project see <http://www.eldia-project.org/>.

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# 1 Introduction: Speakers of Meänkieli in Sweden

Meänkieli is the official name of the language located close to the far northern dialects of Finnish spoken in the Swedish parts of the Torne Valley and its surroundings. Residents of the area, the Torne Valley, are often referred as Tornedalians irrespective of which language they speak. It should be noted that although Meänkieli is the official name of the language many people refer to their language as “Finnish” (*suomi*), “our Finnish” (*meän suomi*) or “Tornevalley Finnish” (*tornionlaakson suomi*). On the other hand, people in Finnish Torne Valley may call their Finnish dialect Meänkieli although the term was originally invented in Swedish Torne Valley (e.g., Huss–Lindgren 1999: 309). There are also a lot of immigrants in the area from Finland who speak Finnish as well as Sweden Finns who have moved to the area from Southern Sweden.

Meänkieli speakers became a border minority when Sweden lost most of Finland to Russia in 1809 and the border between Sweden and the new autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland was fixed at the Torne River. Meänkieli and Finnish are national minority languages in Sweden and, since 2000, have had the status of an official minority language in five northern municipalities: Haparanda, Övertorneå, Pajala, Kiruna and Gällivare. Kalix municipality was affiliated into the Meänkieli administrative district in April 2011. On the Finnish side of the Torne Valley, the local dialect, although historically belonging to the same language variety as on the Swedish side, is considered a dialect of Finnish. On the map below, the municipalities where Meänkieli has official minority language status are highlighted in grey.

Sweden does not collect official statistics regarding its number of minority language speakers, so there is no reliable data on the speakers of Meänkieli. According to Ethnologue ([www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=fit](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=fit)) there are about 40,000–70,000 ethnic Tornedalians in the main region and about 20,000 people speak the language at home.

Language is the only single thing that distinguishes a minority in the area and thus can be argued to be the only identity marker for the group (Wande 2000). However, regional and

cultural identity is strong, perhaps stronger than minority identity, and does not require language skills (Wande 2000: 45, Arola in prep).



**Figure 1. The municipalities where Meänkieli has official minority language status.**

Wande argues that Tornedalian is not an ethnic identity but rather a regional identity where the area's connection to Meänkieli language is historically important. However, even though young people don't think one should know Meänkieli to be Tornedalian, many of them think knowing the language makes one *more* Tornedalian (Arola 2004; Arola in prep).

## 2 Socio-political Context

### 2.1 Legal and Political Position

Sweden recognises five national minorities – the Sámi, the Sweden Finns, the Tornedalians, the Roma and the Jews, due to their being part of Sweden's cultural heritage. These five groups have special rights and their languages have been official minority languages since 2000. Minority policy is shaped by the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Sweden ratified both of these European treaties in 2000.

There are altogether seven major laws concerning Meänkieli. The language laws define in which form and with whom one can use Meänkieli and Finnish when in contact with public institutions. The educational laws define how Meänkieli should be offered as a school subject or language of instruction.

Special laws have been adopted which entitle individuals to use Sámi, Finnish and Meänkieli in dealings with administrative authorities and courts of law in the geographical areas (administrative areas) in which these languages have traditionally been used and are still used widely today. Children and school pupils of minority groups in Sweden have the right to education in their mother-tongue; Tornedalians, Sweden Finns, Sámi and Roma have special rights in this respect. The minority languages may be requested in elderly care. According to law, elderly people speaking Meänkieli have the right to receive care wholly or partly in their own language within the relevant administrative district, which comprises Gällivare, Haparanda, Kiruna, Pajala, Övertorneå and Kalix. (Sweden's report on the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.) All laws and regulations are available at [www.riksdagen.se](http://www.riksdagen.se).

In the regulations for Swedish radio, public broadcasting should provide a sufficient number of hours in Meänkieli and Finnish on TV and radio. However, no precise figures are mentioned (SR 2009). In practice the regulations are obviously interpreted according to the political position of the group. Therefore, we find great differences in provided media hours per language divided by the number of speakers of the particular language; Meänkieli has had a weaker position compared to Sámi and Finnish.

On 1 January 2010 a new Act on National Minorities and National Minority Languages came into force in Sweden. The new law is a response to the problems that were found in Sweden's implementation of its international obligations to support national minorities and their languages. A significant innovation is that the administrative areas where special minority language rights protection is provided are expanded from seven municipalities to 25 for Finnish and to 20 for Sámi; the administrative area for Meänkieli is not expanded (§6). Even outside these administrative areas, individuals have the right to use Finnish, Meänkieli or Sámi in their dealings with administrative authorities, but only if their case can be handled

by personnel proficient in the respective language (§9). This latter provision is, however, not equally extended to dealings with courts. (Zimmermann 2010.)

The County Board of Stockholm is responsible for the supervision and implementation of the law within the public institutions and municipalities. The National Board of Education (*Skolverket*) is responsible for education in minority languages and for the minority language groups. The municipalities work to provide minority languages according to the Social law (*Socialtjänstlagen*), for example making sure that there are employees who know minority languages. The Language Council of Sweden ([www.sprakradet.se](http://www.sprakradet.se)) document, monitor the implementation, keep records, do research, analyse and spread information and material on the minority languages.

The only group officially defined and protected by law as an indigenous people in Sweden are the Sámi. This has caused resentment among some Meänkieli speakers who feel that they deserve a similar status.

Meänkieli speakers are officially represented by organization *STR-T* (Svenska Tornedalingars Riksförbund – Tornionlaaksolaiset) which was established in 1981. This organisation co-operates with Swedish authorities in Meänkieli related questions and it is the duty of the *STR-T* to make statements concerning minority language issues in Sweden. An independent foundation *Meän akateemi/Academia Tornedaliensis* was founded in 1988 as a result of a proposition by *STR-T*. It co-operates with the *STR-T*, especially on linguistic and cultural matters. For the moment it is running scientific projects like a bilingual, two-way dictionary for Meänkieli/Swedish (together with the division for linguistic technology at the University of Tromsø), a revitalisation project on vocabulary and place names (together with central Swedish administrative units, a computer-based corpus for Meänkieli (with Computer Science, Stockholm University) and a history book project for one of the communities in the Torne Valley.

In addition to this, there are some associations in the area connected with Meänkieli language and Tornedalian culture issues, such as *Meänmaa* and *Kveenimaayhistys* (Kvenlandsförbundet). Association *Meänmaa* concentrates especially on cross-border co-operation with Finnish Tornedalians whereas *Kveenimaayhistys* co-operates mostly with Kvens in Norway.



## 2.2 Attitudes

Meänkieli speakers have always lived in Sweden but have been treated with suspicion by the majority for a long time. Meänkieli speakers' loyalty to the Swedish Crown was surmised and the border minority was considered to be a risk for national security. (Slunga 1965.) This was one of the reasons that led to an assimilation policy and negative attitudes towards the Meänkieli language and its speakers.

Among Swedish Tornedalians, monolingual Swedish speakers have always had a higher prestige than bilinguals. For example, Meänkieli speakers used to have a common saying that marriage to a monolingual Swedish speaker was nicer compared to a local bilingual. Meänkieli has been valued negatively both by outsiders as well as in-group members and the language has been called e.g. "bastard language" and "mixed language".

Since the 1960's it has been common to describe Meänkieli speakers as *semi-linguals* (the term created by Hansegård) who do not master Swedish or their own language properly. At the end of the 1960's, Jaakkola (1969) showed that diglossia in the region was common and that attitudes towards Meänkieli were negative. (See Kunnas-Arola 2010: 121-122.) According to Winsas (1998: 119), even at the beginning of the 1990s it was common among Meänkieli speakers to be ashamed of their own language. However, according to the same author (Winsa 2005) since around 2000 onwards, the status of Meänkieli has risen. Based on pupils' attendance in MTI (mother-tongue instruction) there was a boom in interest towards Meänkieli in the early 2000's, but this interest has, since around 2005, been steadily falling. For example, the interest to study Meänkieli in primary schools has fallen dramatically in Övertorneå and Pajala. The status of Meänkieli is low compared to Swedish and other major European languages. Young people seem to have a positive but rather complex relationship with Meänkieli that often leads to acknowledgement of the importance of the language as a part of culture and identity but not to use it (Arola in prep.).

Wingstedt (1996) has studied beliefs and attitudes of the majority towards minority language issues in Sweden and Sweden's minority language policies towards the Sámi and the Tornedalians. The results show that language ideologies among monolingual Swedish lay people do not favour multilingualism. It also seems that Meänkieli speakers suffer from the

bad reputation of being a large Finnish immigrant group, and are thus more negatively seen than the Sámi people. (Wingstedt 1996.)

According to Arola (in prep.) young monolingual Swedish speakers of the Torne Valley area have negative attitudes towards Meänkieli and Sámi languages. Young Meänkieli speakers also feel that the majority of people have negative attitudes towards the minority (Cullblom 1994; Arola 2004; Arola in prep). Whether or not this is true it may still affect the language and identity choices. Besides, Meänkieli speakers think that Finnish people have negative attitudes towards Meänkieli (Arola 2004, Arola in prep) although this is not true at least among young Finnish Tornedalians (Vaattovaara 2009).

### 3 Cultural Context

**Theatres and music.** Even before the revitalisation of Meänkieli began in the 1980s, numerous bilingual amateur theatres were established in several villages around Swedish Torne Valley, and theatre has been an important domain in the use of Meänkieli. In Pajala, there is a regional theatre *Tornedalsteatern* (Tornevalley Theatre) that was established in 1986 ([www.tornedalsteatern.com/](http://www.tornedalsteatern.com/)). In Övertorneå, an amateur theatre group *Meänmaa teatteri* has been operating since 2005. It is entirely voluntary and there are performances in Meänkieli, Finnish and Swedish ([http://meanmaa.net/index\\_mmt.htm](http://meanmaa.net/index_mmt.htm)).

There are several local bands and musicians performing in Meänkieli (e.g. Winsa 2000: 63–68). Meänkieli activists have also attempted to create a “Eurovision” song contest for minority languages. The song contest for stateless minority languages was arranged from 2002 to 2004 in the Netherlands ([www.liet.nl](http://www.liet.nl)). SWEBLUL (The Swedish Bureau for Lesser Used Languages) broadened the concept to include all recognised minority languages. In 2006 the contest, now under the Frisian-Sámi title *Liet Lavlut*, took place in Östersund. This was the first time ever a band performing in Meänkieli participated in a major contest. By 2008 the song contest had turned into a culture and music festival lasting four days, supported by Council of Europe. SWEBLUL has also arranged among youngsters an Interreg-project which aims to develop songs and music in minority languages. Via the project many youngsters became interested in minority languages and got linked up with others with

similar interests in the region. The project started in 2006 and was scheduled to come to an end in 2008 but with additional funding the project continued until 2010.

**Local festivals.** One festival, which is a direct outcome of the revitalisation process of Meänkieli, is the *Römppäviikko*<sup>1</sup> festival which was first arranged in Pajala in the 1980s. During this week long festival there are cultural performances in several villages in Pajala ([www.romppa.se/](http://www.romppa.se/)). Another big culture festival in the Meänkieli speaking area is *European Festival of the Night* (Nattfestivalen). It was first organised in 2005 and nowadays this two week long festival takes place every December in Korpilombolo. The *European Festival of the Night* consists of a great number of lectures, workshops, concerts, performances and exhibitions (<http://nightfestival.se/>). The festival is highly international, and several conferences have been organised on Meänkieli and minority languages, for example, for teachers.

It is an old tradition to celebrate Midsummer all over Sweden, but in Pajala a special Midsummer culture festival takes place - *Meänfestivaali* ([www.meanfestivaali.com](http://www.meanfestivaali.com)). The recently established *Meänfestivaali* is largely focused on Meänkieli and music related to the Tornedalian culture. Besides this, an old and traditional event, *The Pajala Fair* (Pajala Marknad) attracts many thousands of visitors to Pajala every year in July. Laestadian meetings (*Stormöte-Isot seurat*) held every summer could perhaps be defined as religious “festivals” attracting many thousands of believers during the course of a few days.

**Cultural symbols.** There are very few Swedish Tornedalian cultural symbols besides the language. Torne Valley as an area does of course have cultural characteristics (on both sides of the border), such as food and handicrafts, but they don't seem to form a significant part of the areas identity. There are only a few Finnish cultural traditions that are maintained, such as sauna and traditional leather shoes, but this is not a very marked aspect. The traditional dress – only marginally used today – is a symbol for the whole county and the minority group has no clothing symbol of its own. Often cultural symbols are not even recognised: in 2008 most high school students did not know if there was any Tornedalian culture at all. The few characteristics named were mostly language, sauna and nature. It is notable that their idea of Sámi culture was much clearer. (Arola in prep.). The weakness of

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<sup>1</sup> *Römppäviikko* is an old agricultural term which refers to vacation time after the autumn season work has been finished.

cultural symbols in Torne Valley can be understood against the historical development of the area. Until 1809, the Tornedalians on both sides of the river were united in one ethnic group and as such part of the Finnish people and within a (Northern) Finnish cultural context with additional Torne Valley regional characteristics. When the connection broke and cross border co-operation and minority languages and cultures were assimilated, cultural symbols vanished and new ones were not created.

**Prominent writers.** The two most prominent writers connected with the Meänkieli area are Bengt Pohjanen and Mikael Niemi. Pohjanen is a well-known Meänkieli author who writes in Swedish, Finnish and Meänkieli. Pohjanen writes literature, drama, librettos, chronicles, poetry and songs. Mikael Niemi, although often writing about his roots in the Meänkieli area, only writes in Swedish. His novel *Populärmusik från Vittula*, situated in Tornedalen in the 1960s and explicitly dealing with the language situation there, won the Swedish national literature prize (*Augustpriset*) in 2000; it has been translated into many languages, including Meänkieli, and also made into a film, and it has greatly contributed to the national and international publicity of Meänkieli. Besides Niemi and Pohjanen, there are lots of other active writers among Tornedalians who write in Meänkieli or in Swedish (see e.g. Winsa 2000: 61–67; Gröndahl 2002).

**Religion.** The Meänkieli area, like the Nordic countries in general, is traditionally Lutheran and nowadays is as secularised as most other parts of Sweden. Meänkieli is used at some special Church events but there are some attitudes against it as it is not considered to be “proper” to use it in a Holy context. Finnish is, and has traditionally been used at churches in the area. The work in minority languages is organised by the diocese of Luleå. The gospels and some hymns have been translated to Meänkieli.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861) established a religious revival movement called the *Laestadian movement* and it was very popular among the Sámi people, Swedish Tornedalians, Kvens and Finnish people all over the North Calotte as well as among monolingual Swedes in Northern Sweden. The Laestadians are formally members of the Lutheran Church but see themselves as a distinct group of “true believers”. From the beginning, Finnish language has had an important role in the Laestadian movement as a “holy language”. The influence of the Laestadian movement for the use of Finnish and Meänkieli can hardly be overstressed. The religious values of the movement have influenced

the regional culture and Laestadianism has always been a strong religious marker of a unified Torne Valley identity. Today, the movement is said to be a minority within a minority in the Swedish Torne Valley.

### *3.1 General description of the language*

Genetically, Meänkieli is completely different from the Indo-European/Germanic Swedish. Together with Finnish, it belongs to the Finnic subgroup of the Finno-Ugric language family and is somewhat more distantly related to Sámi.

Meänkieli is a part of the Finnish dialect continuum. From a linguistic perspective especially formal written Meänkieli (with no natural code-switching to Swedish) is very close to the Far-Northern dialects of Finnish spoken on the other side of the Torne River. The grammar of Far-Northern dialects of Finnish and Meänkieli are quite similar and also the varieties have many common dialect expressions. However, Swedish has heavily influenced the syntax as well as phonetics of Meänkieli. (Sulkala 2010). The major difference between Finnish and Meänkieli is found in the lexicon. Meänkieli speakers frequently use code-switching and Swedish loan words. Where Finnish since its emancipation from the 19th century on has developed thousands of new words, Meänkieli has borrowed words from Swedish, and the Standard Finnish neologisms are not easily intelligible to Meänkieli speakers. For Meänkieli speakers, the texts written in Far-Northern dialects of Finnish can be read more easily.

The three main dialects of Meänkieli are dialects of Torne Valley, Kiruna-Jukkasjärvi and Gällivare. The most prominent place where Meänkieli is used and supported is Pajala. The Kven language or Old Finnish dialects spoken in Northern Norway are close to Meänkieli and there is co-operation in developing the standards between the organisations of these languages.

The research of Winsas (1998: 20) reveals that in 1990, the dialect of Gällivare with a lot of Sámi influence had the lowest prestige among Meänkieli speakers. The second lowest status was the Vittangi-Jukkasjärvi dialect. The dialect of the Torne Valley spoken in Pajala and Övertorneå had the highest status of the local Meänkieli language varieties. Without doubt, most people argue that spoken and written Finnish (Finland Finnish) has the highest status.

However, Meänkieli as a literary language has increased its popularity compared to literary Finnish since the 1980s when the revitalisation movement started.

The written language of Meänkieli has been developed since 1970s. The standard is still under development and not yet widely known among lay people. The language planning of Meänkieli is monitored by DAUM<sup>2</sup> which is part of the Language Council of Sweden. The written language of Meänkieli is mostly based on the variety spoken in Pajala and Övertorneå municipalities. The reason for this is practical: almost all authors and performers who use Meänkieli in their writing and cultural products were born in Pajala or Övertorneå. Nowadays, there are some texts in other varieties as well and discussion continues on whether the basis of standard should be widened. Another big issue are loanwords: whether new, modern lexicon should be created on the basis of Meänkieli or whether to borrow the words from Swedish or Finnish.

### *3.2 Language contact and multilingualism*

Speakers of Meänkieli master the Swedish very well and there are practically no monolinguals left among Meänkieli speakers. Swedish speakers in the area have not traditionally learned Meänkieli. Meänkieli speakers in the border area might have some knowledge of (Finland's) Finnish. In the villages near Sámi areas there are many trilingual people (Sámi, Meänkieli, Swedish). Swedish is used with Norwegians and Finnish, Swedish and nowadays more and more English with Finnish people. The whole area of Meänkieli and Sámi is currently moving towards monolingualism in Swedish, except in the border region of Haparanda where Finnish immigrants and commercial interests promote multilingualism and knowledge of Finnish.

### *3.3 Language use and maintenance*

Meänkieli has previously been mainly used in the private sphere, but language shift and language policies have resulted into a situation where language use at home is declining. Instead, Meänkieli has gained some new public domains. The right to use Meänkieli with authorities has not yet worked so well in practice and according to the study of Elenius &

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<sup>2</sup> *Dialekt-, ortnamns- och folkminnesarkivet i Umeå* (The Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research in Umeå)

Ekenberg (2002) the reason behind this seems to be ignorance of the language rights, negative attitudes as well as a lack of language skills.

Meänkieli has a fairly good position on Swedish radio. In 2008, a total of 1,053 hours of programmes were broadcast in Meänkieli. The Pajala radio (SR) has 5 employees and it broadcasts 3–4 hours of programmes in Meänkieli daily. The resources are however unbalanced if compared with the Finnish radio and the Sámi radio.

There are no daily newspapers in Meänkieli. STR-T publishes a magazine called *Met-Avisi* 6 times per year with a circulation of about 4,000. *Met-Avisi* is a four-sided newspaper and it is published between the pages of the newspaper *Haparandabladet*. The Meänmaa association has published a magazine in Meänkieli and Finnish a couple of times. The circulation varies, but is estimated to be about 2,000. The author Bengt Pohjanen writes a column in Meänkieli in *Haparandabladet*, which is published three times per week with a circulation of 4,000.

The use of Meänkieli among younger generations is declining (Winsa 1998, Arola in prep.). Those who use the language daily are mainly over 40 years old. There are some younger people who can speak Meänkieli, but it is more common that young people have only some passive knowledge of the language. Language transmission at home mainly stopped during the 1970s. However, in the Torne Valley a significant percentage of young people still have a strong identity connection to the language and they have learnt at least some of it at home (Arola in prep.). No research on the language of younger generations has been made but anecdotal knowledge and the interviews made during ELDIA-project supports the impression that young people use more Swedish loan words than older generations.

Because of the active revitalisation movement, Meänkieli has gained a status as an official minority language. It has also entered new domains such as school, media, literature and cultural events. There are efforts to get children and young people interested in Meänkieli but no serious efforts to establish Meänkieli language nests for children for example, have been made. Language policy has affected the public use of the language but has not succeeded to reverse the language shift at home.

The field experiences show that Meänkieli is a seriously threatened language with only a handful of children learning it as a mother tongue. However, documentation and research

about language choices in families are somewhat lacking. It would be important to obtain reliable updated data concerning the number of Meänkieli speakers, their geographical distribution and age. Meänkieli speakers outside of the Torne Valley and its surroundings have not been studied at all. This is a large group of speakers and very little is known of their distribution, language choices and language use.

There is a lack of description of contemporary Meänkieli both in its spoken and written form. Prior descriptions of the dialects are very old or restricted. We have hardly any linguistic research into the written form of Meänkieli and its development. The revitalisation process of Meänkieli has been studied only in a couple of research papers (Huss 1999; Sulkala 2001).

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