

# ÖVDALIAN – A BRIEF BACKGROUND

## 1. Research history and standardization

Övdalian is spoken in the northern parts of Dalecarlia, in the parish of Älvdalen (Övdaln), by about 3000 speakers (the parish has 5200 inhabitants, roughly, but estimates of the number of speakers vary; see <http://www.alvdalen.se/alvdalska2005.htm>). There are 21 villages in the parish, with minor dialectal differences, mainly phonetical (Sapir 2005).

Övdalian and Swedish are mutually incomprehensible, and Övdalian displays non-Swedish characteristics on every linguistic level. There are however no monolingual Övdalians anymore, but some (mostly older) speakers speak Swedish with an accent. Dahl (2005:10; see also Ringmar 2005) claims that Övdalian is approximately as distant from spoken standard Swedish than from spoken Icelandic (but closer to Swedish than spoken English), and accordingly Övdalian must be considered a separate language, not a Swedish dialect (at least from a linguistic point of view).

Övdalian has been of interest for Swedish linguists since the beginning of the 17th century. The first example of a text written in Övdalian (except for some runic inscriptions) is found in Prytz (1622), reprinted by Lundell (1883) and translated and commented by Noreen (1883) in the same volume. This text consists of about 90 lines of spoken prose in a drama, and it seems to be a rather adequate rendering of spoken Övdalian of that time (Noreen 1903:173).

During the 18th century, Övdalian is discussed in a few linguistic dissertations, e.g. Näsman (1733), but the major syntactic work is Levander (1909), in which the morphosyntactic properties of Övdalian are carefully presented and discussed. Levander's dissertation has also given Övdalian a position as one of the best known vernaculars in Sweden, although the surrounding areas (Sollerön, Mora, Orsa, Våmhus) were probably just as interesting from a linguistic perspective in the 19th century; however, it is undisputably so that the people in Älvdalen have been more reluctant to abandon their traditional tongue.

More recently, Övdalian has been discussed by the sociolinguist Helgander (1996, 2005) and by Nyström (1983, 1995, 2000), whose main interest are the phonological properties of Övdalian. Lars Steensland has also contributed greatly to the knowledge of Övdalian in a number of works (the latest are Steensland 2006a, 2006b). As for recent syntactic studies of Övdalian, there are Platzack (1995), which to some extent is based on Rosenkvist (1994), Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2006), who investigates dative case in Övdalian, Garbacz (2006) and Rosenkvist (2006).

From the beginning of the 20th century, Övdalian has been challenged by Swedish and the number of monolingual Övdalians has successively diminished – today some are bilingual, mastering both languages, whereas others, mainly younger speakers, speak Övdalian with obvious lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactic interference from Swedish (Helgander 2005). The differences concerning morphological forms and pronunciation between the villages, which among the speakers themselves is a

well known feature, may at present be less prominent than the differences between the generations.

The association Ulum Dalska ('let us speak Övdalian') was started in 1984 and is engaged in documenting, preserving and standardizing Övdalian; it has about 2000 members.<sup>1</sup> Since 2004 there is an Övdalian language council (Råddjörum) which, among other things, has developed a standard orthography. In collaboration with Ulum Dalska, Gunnar Nyström and Yair Sapir have given courses in Övdalian the last two years. They have developed a course material (Nyström & Sapir 2005a) which comprises ten lessons, as well as a brief grammar appendix ((Nyström & Sapir 2005b). However, also Bengt Åkerberg has written a grammar of Övdalian (Åkerberg 2004), which is quite comprehensive (more than 150 pages). When utilizing these resources, one must however consider the fact that they are based on Levander (1909), and Levander often turned to the oldest available informants. Hence, the Övdalian that is conveyed by both Nyström & Sapir (2005a, b) and Åkerberg (2004) is not current spoken Övdalian. E.g, contrary to the data presented in those grammars, even the oldest living Övdalians hardly ever differ between nominative and accusative case in a systematic fashion. These works rather intend to revitalize an older form of Övdalian (known as classical Övdalian) than to describe current spoken Övdalian, in line with Ulum Dalskas standardization policy. At present, virtually all Övdalian publications follow Ulum Dalska's recommendations.

---

<sup>1</sup> The homepage is: <http://www.ehf.se/ulumdalska/pages/frames.html>



in VC: 'in'

si'tt CV:C: 'seen'

Also /n/ may form syllables:

4. we'n 'the road' tienn'n 'the pond'

Apocope is very frequent in Övdalian, and it is also more systematic than in other Scandinavian languages, it seems. A lexicon word may never appear in its lexicographic form – e.g, the adverb *sakta* ('actually') is almost always realized as *sakt*.

5. Anna wille sakta inte flytta dait. lexicographic form<sup>2</sup>

Ann willd sakt int flytt dait. written/spoken form

The accent is kept when bisyllabic words are pronounced as monosyllabic – Övdalian monosyllabic words may have grave accent (like Catalán).

The nasal /ng/ is often followed by /g/. Then /g/ may be pronounced distinctively.

6. laingger [lainger] 'longer' OBS TECKEN!

---

<sup>2</sup> It must be pointed out that the ortographic marking of apocope varies – Åkerberg (2004) marks unpronounced consonants by crossing them out, but newer publications just omit unpronounced consonants in writing. Older publications (Larsson 1985, e.g.) deal with apocope in idiosyncratic ways.

## 2.2. Basic morphology

Nouns are inflected for case, number and gender. Traditionally, it is assumed that the cases are nominative, accusative and dative – genitive is often expressed otherwise (see the list of interesting features in Övdalian syntax). However, accusative case is virtually never found in current spoken Övdalian. Below, the most frequent paradigms are presented – nouns belonging to other classes have other forms.

		<b>masc.</b>		<b>fem.</b>	
		<b>indef.</b>	<b>def.</b>	<b>indef.</b>	<b>def.</b>
sg.	nom.	ien kall ('man')	kalln	je nql ('needle')	nqlę
	acc.	ien kall	kalln	ien nql	nqlę
	dat.	ienum kalle	kallem	ien nql	nqln
pl.	nom.	flier kaller	kallär	flier nqler	nqlär
	acc.	flier kalla	kallå	flier nolr	nqlär
	dat.	flierum kallum	kallum	flierum nqlum	nqlum
		<b>neut.</b>			
		<b>indef.</b>	<b>def.</b>		
sg.	nom.	iet buord ('table')	buordeð		
	acc.	iet buord	buordeð		
	dat.	ien buorde	buorde		
pl.	nom.	flieru buord	buorde		
	acc.	flieru buord	buorde		
	dat.	flierum buordum	buordum		

Adjectives also agree in number, case and gender.

**masc, indef**

**sg**

**pl**

nom.	ien stur kall ('a big man')	flier stur kaller <sup>3</sup>
acc.	ien sturan kall	flier stur kalla
dat.	ienum sturum kalle	flierum sturum kallum

**fem, indef**

**sg**

**pl**

nom.	je grann kulla ('a pretty girl')	flier grann kullur
acc.	ien grann kullu	flier grann kullur
dat.	ien grann kullu	flierum grannum kullum

**neut, indef**

**sg**

**pl**

nom.	iet sturt aus ('a big house')	flieru sturu aus
acc.	iet sturt aus	flieru sturu aus
dat.	iet stur ause	flierum sturum ausum

Only adjectives in the positive form are inflected as above.

In definite nominal phrases, adjectives are in general incorporated with the head noun: *guolbuotje* ('yellow-book-the'), *grannkullur* ('pretty-girls-the'), *stubuarde* ('big-tables').

---

<sup>3</sup> *Stur* is pronounced with grave accent in the plural form – accent often acts as a distinguishing feature in Övdalian morphology, but it is usually not marked in writing.

Verbs agree in number and person, the forms being quite similar to Icelandic verb agreement.

		strong verbs		weak verbs	
		present	past	present	past
sg.	1.	bait ('bite')	biet	mɔler ('paint')	mɔleð
	2.	bait	biet	mɔler	mɔleð
	3.	bait	biet	mɔler	mɔleð
pl.	1.	baitum	bietum	mɔlum	mɔleðum
	2.	baitið	bietið	mɔlið	mɔleðið
	3.	baita	bietu	mɔla	mɔleð

### 2.3. Prepositional case and compounds

The complements of Övdalian prepositions appear either in accusative or dative case. In general, prepositions that express position are followed by dative, whereas those that express direction are followed by accusative. Some prepositions can belong to both groups, depending on the context. The preposition *i* is, e.g, followed by dative when it occurs in an answer to the question *when?*, but by accusative in an answer to *how long?*. On the whole, the prepositional system reminds strongly about Icelandic.

Prepositions (and adverbs) very often appear in compounds, and such compounds seems to be a quite productive part of Övdalian. Some examples are *brotter* ('away-after'), *juotringgum* ('here-around') and *westnest* ('west-with').