

Piotr Garbacz

University of Oslo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6622-0370>

Revitalisation of Övdalian and the Choice of Literary Language¹

Övdalian (Swe. *älvdalska*), an East Scandinavian vernacular that is often considered a separate language, has undergone preservation and revitalisation during the last 30–40 years. An interesting aspect of the revitalisation process is the choice of the morphological form of Övdalian used in books, fiction and translations, as the case morphology has changed substantially over the past century. The vast majority of authors have nevertheless opted for a very traditional variant that differs substantially from contemporary spoken Övdalian. This raises questions about whether the revitalisation of Övdalian, of which book production is an important aspect, is a bottom-up process or a top-down imposition of a partly idealised, archaic language (cf. Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 20).

Keywords: Övdalian, Elfdalian, standardisation, revitalisation, literary language, language standard

1. Introduction

Övdalian (also termed *Elfdalian* and *Oevdalian* in English; Swe. *älvdalska*, *älvdalsmål*; Övd. *dalska*, *övdalska*, *övkallmål*), is spoken by around 2,500 people (according to data based on the speakers' own declarations, collected by *Ulum Dalska*, the organisation for preservation of Övdalian (Ulum Dalska n.d.)), in the old parish of Älvdalen in the province of Dalarna in Western Sweden. It has received much attention in the last 40 years, since along with six other neighbouring vernaculars of Ovansiljan (spoken in and around the villages of Mora, Ore, Orsa, Sollerön, Venjan and Våmhus)², it differs significantly from both Swedish and the other

¹ The author thanks two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on a previous version of this paper. All the remaining shortcomings are the author's own.

² Cf. Garbacz (2019) for an up-to-date presentation of these vernaculars; Ringmar and Olander (2020) for a paper on case forms in the vernaculars of Ore, Orsa and Våmhus; Berntzen (2024) on the negation system and negative concord in the vernaculars of Orsa, Våmhus and Älvdalen; and Jacobsen (2024) on the case system dissolution in the vernaculars of Orsa, Våmhus and Älvdalen.

Scandinavian standard languages and non-standard variants. Many scholars, as well as activists, have argued that Övdalian should be recognised as an independent (regional) language in Sweden, rather than a dialect of Swedish (e.g. Bentzen et al. 2015: 4), and in the spring of 2024 prof. Henrik Rosenkvist (University of Gothenburg) sued the Swedish government for discrimination of Övdalian (Kallersand 2024). At the same time, Övdalian (like the other six vernaculars of Övansiljan) has been losing ground to Swedish in a process that has continued since at least the 1920s (Helgander 1996: 49–90). The vernacular has undergone changes affecting all the linguistic levels; and the distance between Övdalian spoken by those born in the second half of the 19th century and those born in the 21st century could be compared to the distance between written Late Old Swedish (mainly 15th century) and written Late Modern Swedish (mainly 19th century). Against this background, at the beginning of the 1980s, efforts began to preserve Övdalian and since then extensive work has been done to preserve and revitalise Övdalian (see Sapir 2017 for an overview of the measures).

One of the revitalisation measures, especially in the last two decades, was the publication of literary fiction in Övdalian and the translation of books into Övdalian. These efforts have resulted in more than 30 books in Övdalian (children's books, fiction and translations). One of the important issues was to determine the form of Övdalian which the books should be written in/translated into. The orthographic standard of Övdalian (since 2005) does not address features such as syntax, case marking or vocabulary choice (*Råd djärum* 2005), i.e. features that have changed significantly during the 20th century (the category of case has been virtually lost, for example, cf. Jacobsen 2024, and the word order and vocabulary have changed substantially, as the vernacular has been strongly influenced by Swedish, cf. Garbacz and Johannessen 2015). Some authors/translators have nevertheless opted for an outwardly conservative variant of Övdalian that is no longer spoken. This choice was made by Bo Westling in his 2007 translation of *Le Petit Prince* (Saint-Exupéry 1946/2007). Other authors (and translators), like Barbro Götesson (Götesson 2021), Björn Rehnström (1999, 2006, 2021) and Inga-Britt Petersson (e.g. Wislander 2003/2022) have chosen a variant that is slightly less conservative than the one chosen by Westling, but that still employs full case inflection (although the case category is now gradually being lost, as shown by Jacobsen 2024). Only one author, Hjalmar Larsson, in his book *Kununds in kumb* ("The king is coming") (Larsson 1985), has chosen a variant of Övdalian that was spoken by many of the older speakers when the book was written, i.e. a variant that was not made artificially more conservative.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I give an overview of the linguistic features of Övdalian, and its periodisation and development since the end of the 19th century. Section 3 is devoted to the preservation, standardisation and revitalisation processes for Övdalian, while the actual choice of the literary language within the Övdalian literature is presented in section 4. Finally, section 5 discusses the impact of the standardised form of the language on the revitalisation process.

2. Övdalian and its development since the end of the 19th century

Övdalian is an East Scandinavian variant, traditionally classified as a Swedish dialect within the group of the Ovansiljan vernaculars, one of the three subgroups of Dalecarlian dialects (Ovansiljan, Nedansiljan, Västerdalarna), being in turn a part of the larger dialect group, *Sveamål*. The seven Ovansiljan vernaculars (see section 1 above) have a special position among the Scandinavian dialects (cf. Hallberg 2005: 1697). They differ significantly from most other dialects and at the same time represent a unique mixture of, on the one hand, very archaic features (e.g. remnants of case inflection, retained verb inflection in person and number in the majority of the vernaculars, three syllable lengths in many of the vernaculars, i.e. short, long and overlong syllables, and – in some vernaculars – phonemic nasality) and, on the other hand, innovations (e.g. double subjects in Övdalian, negative concord, null referential subjects in Övdalian, and verbal inflection forms varying according to the position of the verb in relation to the subject, in the vernacular of Orsa). The geographical distribution of the Dalecarlian dialects is shown in Map 1 below:



Map 1: The geographical distribution of the Dalecarlian dialects in Sweden (after Dahl 2005: 1 and Garbacz 2019: 201)

Övdalian has been spoken continuously in Älvdalen since the late Middle Ages, and probably at least since the 13th century (Levander 1925: 43), and it is documented in runic inscriptions since the 16th century, and in the Latin alphabet since 1622 (Björklund 1958). The use of runes in Älvdalen was the longest prevailing in Scandinavia and runes were still in continuous use at the beginning of the 20th century. Today, the speakers are mostly elderly people, although 170 speakers are under the age of 20 (Ulla Schütt p.c.), which is a clear increase compared to the situation in 2007, when the number of Övdalian speakers aged under 15 was only 50 (Larsson et al. 2008). One should nevertheless remember that the statistics for Övdalian speakers are based on self-reported data.

Övdalian is normally unintelligible to those who speak Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese or Icelandic and can also be challenging to understand for speakers of other Dalecarlian dialects, although there is a high degree of mutual comprehension within the Ovensiljan vernaculars (especially those of Vämhus, Orsa, Mora and Sollerön), to which Övdalian is closely related. Övdalian displays a number of characteristic features at every linguistic level.

At the phonological level, there is – among other things – deletion of initial/h/ (e.g. *q̄* ‘she’, *ur* ‘how’, *åvå* ‘to have’ – Swe. *hon, hur, ha*), diphthongisation of old long vowels (e.g. *aus* ‘house’, *wait* ‘white’, *aut* ‘out’ – Swe. *hus, vit, ut*), short syllables (*tålä* ‘speak’, *djårå* ‘do’, *wårå* ‘be’ – Swe. *tala, göra, vara*), overlong syllables (*ro’tt*, ‘red. NEUT’ *si’tt* ‘seen’ – Swe. *rött, sett*), apocope (*Ann ulld myöt onum i går* ‘Anna was going to meet him yesterday’ – Swe. *Anna skulle möta honom igår*), and phonematic nasality (*wjđ* ‘we’ – *wiđ* ‘wood’ – Swe. *vi, ved*).

At the morphological level, Övdalian resembles the other Scandinavian languages, when the system as a whole is considered. However, it differs in one important aspect from Icelandic (it has lost the conjunctive mode) and in two important aspects from Swedish, Danish and Norwegian (it has retained verbal inflection in number and person and remnants of an earlier three-case system, containing nominative, dative and accusative).³ The verbal inflection has the same verbal form for all persons in the singular and three different forms for all three persons in the plural, in both present and past tense, and for both weak and strong verbs (however, in the past tense, the third person plural of weak verbs is identical to the singular form). The case system is dissolved in spoken Övdalian of today and there is a great deal of variation that can be summarised as the old dative forms being most often found for (some) personal pronouns and for definite nouns mostly after a dative-governing preposition, while the old accusative forms are either lost or have become the new base forms. The Övdalian case system of today

³ The genitive case was lost before the 19th century and the old genitive endings are only attested in fixed expressions, e.g. *et messer* ‘to mess.GEN’, *et tjuvörtjer* ‘to church.GEN’, *et Norres* ‘to Norway.GEN’ (cf. Steensland 2021: 409), and as the possessive marker. e.g. *fåðeres aus* ‘father.POSS house’.

is described in-depth in Jacobsen (2024), while the case system of ‘Traditional Övdalian’ (cf. below) is discussed in Svenonius (2015).

At the syntactic level, Övdalian is characterised by both archaisms and (in the context of Scandinavian languages) rare innovations. Among the innovations, it displays negative concord (1), double subjects (2), null subjects in first and second person plural (3), extended use of definiteness (4) and incorporation of adjective in the noun (5).⁴

- (1) *Ig ar it si'tt inggan jär i dag*
 I HAVE NOT SEEN NOBODY HERE TODAY
 ‘I haven’t seen anybody here today’ (Swe. *Jag har inte sett någon här idag*)
- (2) *Du ir sakt du duktin dalska*
 YOU ARE REALLY YOU GOOD SPEAK.ÖVDALIAN.INF
 ‘You are really good at speaking Övdalian’ (Swe. *Du är verkligen duktig på att prata älvdalska*)
- (3) *Kamið juot mes warum aute?*
 CAME.2.PL HITHER WHILE WERE.1.PL OUT
 ‘Did you come here while we were outdoors?’ (Swe. *Kom ni hit medan vi var ute?*)
- (4) *Eð ir grannweðreð aute*
 IT IS BEAUTIFUL.WEATHER.DEF OUT
 ‘It is beautiful weather outside’ (Swe. *Det är vackert väder ute*)
- (5) *ię lislkull*
 A LITTLE.GIRL
 ‘a little girl’ (Swe. *en liten flicka*)

In connection with archaisms, Övdalian shows residues of Stylistic Fronting (6), and residues of V-to-I movement (7), and it has the default placement of possessors after the head noun (8).

- (6) *Oller so ogy og neveð åvå*
 ALL WHO EYES.DEF AND NOSE.DEF HAVE
 ‘all people’ (Swe. *alla som har ögon och näsa*⁵)
- (7) *Um du dug it kumå...*
 IF YOU CAN NOT COME...
 ‘If you can’t come...’ (Swe. *Om du inte kan komma...*)

⁴ Whereas negative concord is very rarely found in Scandinavian varieties, being – apart from Ovensiljan – only attested in Finland Swedish and Estonian Swedish, and traces of it are found in the Sappen dialect of Norwegian and in a very few traditional Danish dialects (Munch 2013: 222–229, Rosenkvist 2015), the extended use of definiteness and the incorporation of the adjective into the noun are known from many Northern Scandinavian dialects, cf. Dahl (2015).

⁵ A direct counterpart of this Övdalian expression does not exist in Swedish.

- (8) *mumun* *mqi*
 MOTHER.MOTHER MINE
 ‘my grandmother’ (Swe. *min mormor*)

Övdalian has a vocabulary that partially differs from contemporary Swedish, e.g. *andyr* ‘ski tracks’ – Swe. *skidspår*, *brinde* ‘moose’ – Swe. *älg*, *brågå* ‘move’ – Swe. *röra*, *ela* ‘kill’ – Swe. *döda*, *kråysse* ‘face’ – Swe. *ansikte*, *kwið* ‘stomach’ – Swe. *mage*, *rakke* ‘dog’ – Swe. *hund*, *tunggel* ‘moon’ – Swe. *måne* and many others, see Dahl (2005).

Since the beginning of modern Swedish dialectology, Övdalian has received the most attention, as it was perceived as the most genuine and archaic vernacular in the Ovansiljan area (Noreen 1881: 7). The picture is more nuanced today, however: the linguistic development in the area since the 1880s has resulted in greater variation and the question of which vernacular is the most conservative is more complex. While Övdalian still preserves the old nasal vowels, it has mostly lost the accusative forms of nouns, which, in turn, are preserved in the vernaculars of Vämhus, Orsa and Ore (Ringmar and Olander 2020, Jacobsen 2024). The neighbouring vernacular of Orsa still preserves the older dative form in the definite form plural on *-umå* (e.g. *kullumå* ‘the girls.DAT’), whereas the corresponding form has been absent from Övdalian for over 100 years (Levander 1909: 13 notes the definite plural datives on *-umä* being sporadically used by older people), and the dative definite plural form today is *kullum* ‘the girls.DAT’. The focus of research has also shifted from mainly addressing the most genuine and archaic vernaculars to interest in development tendencies in the language.

Garbacz (2010: 35 f.), based on Helgander (1996), divides the linguistic development of Övdalian into three stages: (i) Classical Övdalian (spoken by those born before 1920), (ii) Traditional Övdalian (spoken by those born between 1920–1950), and (iii) Modern Övdalian (spoken by those born after 1950). The development has been profound: if the generations are compared, today some of the youngest speakers of Övdalian basically seem to speak Swedish with some Övdalian words and endings, whereas the language of many of the oldest speakers seems in all respects like a completely different language, as distant from Swedish as e.g. Icelandic. Some of the language-internal changes were already mentioned by Levander (1928: 128, 316): the accusative forms of long-syllabic weak feminine nouns were replaced by nominative forms, and the nominative-accusative distinction was threatened and even lost in many cases, at least in the language of the young speakers of that time. Additionally, a study by Åkerberg (1957: 49) showed that the paradigm of long-syllabic weak feminine nouns had lost all case distinctions in the singular, if the language of an informant born in 1867 (who differentiated between nominative-dative-accusative) is compared to the language of an informant born in 1934 (who only had one form for all cases). Helgander (2005), having examined the language of three informants, born in 1914, 1937 and 1984, states that the biggest difference is between the informant born in 1937 and the one born in 1984:

The most interesting material comes from the youngest speaker as it is here that the most thoroughgoing innovations can be found. On the whole, the oldest informant retains the most typical traditional characteristics of the Älvdalen dialect, whereas the middle-aged speaker has already introduced some important innovations. (Helgander 2005: 30)

Whereas the informant born in 1914 retains dative forms, the two others do not, while at the same time the verb inflection in number and person is very stable. The youngest informant differs in phonology from the two older informants: she does not display several of the phonological features of Övdalian, whereas the other two do (Helgander 2005: 10). Given the above, one can conclude that deep, systematic changes have taken place in Övdalian within phonetics, morphology and syntax during at least the last 100–150 years. The source of the changes can be attributed mainly to the strong pressure from Swedish during particular periods of the 20th century, after the social ties present in the old farming society became dissolved around the end of the 1940s (Helgander 1996: 163–166).

3. Preservation, standardisation and revitalisation of Övdalian

At the beginning of the 1980s, efforts to preserve Övdalian from extinction began. The association for preservation of Övdalian, *Ulum Dalska*⁶, was established in 1984, and 20 years later, in 2004, the Övdalian language council, *Rådjärum*⁷, was established. The first Swedish-Övdalian/Övdalian-Swedish dictionary had already been published in the 1980s (Steensland 1986, the latest version containing 22,500 words is Steensland 2021) and translation of the gospels followed (John in 1989, Mark in 2013, Luke in 2015, and Matthew in 2017). In the 1990s, Bengt Åkerberg started to hold courses in Övdalian, resulting in an extensive normative grammar (in several versions, the latest is Åkerberg and Nyström 2012), and a higher education course (5 ECTS) was offered by the Uppsala University in the summer of 2005. The course was taught by Gunnar Nyström and Yair Sapir (neither of whom was a native speaker of Övdalian). In the same year, *Rådjärum* proposed a standard Övdalian orthography, which was accepted by the board of *Ulum Dalska* on 20 March 2005. The main focus after this was not only to preserve, but also to strengthen, Övdalian and to have it recognised as a minority language in Sweden, an effort that resulted in Övdalian gaining an ISO language code in 2016, although it is still not recognised as a minority language by the Swedish authorities. For over a decade, there has been extensive work on revitalisation of Övdalian,

⁶ Övdalian for ‘We will/shall speak Övdalian’ (lit. will.1.PL/shall.1.PL speak.Övdalian.INF).

⁷ Övdalian for ‘We give advice’ (lit. advice.give.1.PL). Interestingly, only two native speakers of Övdalian were among the six members (Bengt Åkerberg and Inga-Britt Petersson); the others were three Swedish linguists (prof. Östen Dahl, prof. Lars Steensland and dialectologist Gunnar Nyström) and one Israeli linguist (Yair Sapir PhD).

especially within the project *Wilum og Bellum*⁸ in the years 2018–2022 (Älvdalens kommun 2020). In this revitalisation work, morphology and the lexicon have been in focus. The Övdalian grammar (Åkerberg and Nyström 2012) and a textbook by Nyström and Sapir (2018), originally developed for the language course in 2005, were a natural point of departure. Both these works present a very conservative language form that dates back to the description of Övdalian made by Levander (1909), as for many, his dissertation has become a point of reference and a “gold standard” for the revitalisation of Övdalian. Levander himself (1909: 4) states that he focused on the variant of Övdalian spoken in the village of Åsen, as this was the best-preserved variant of the vernacular.⁹ The point of reference is thus a variant that was already the most conservative and most archaic at the beginning of the 20th century. Some of the Övdalian speakers have consequently learned or tried to learn linguistic categories that were lacking in the form of Övdalian they acquired as children, typically case forms or some of the older verb forms.¹⁰ The courses in Övdalian were taught in a similar manner to foreign language courses, independently of whether the attendees were L1 or L2/LX speakers. One of the revitalisation efforts was to establish a language scholarship for pupils who speak (and write) Övdalian (3rd grade, 6th grade and 9th grade) of up to around EUR 550/year. This seems to have had an impact on the numbers of interested pupils, and pupils who both try to and claim to speak Övdalian, cf. section 2 above.

A very important aspect of the revitalisation process has been the production of books, but also games and other materials, i.e. sources which include written language. More than 30 books in Övdalian (fiction, translations and children’s books) have been published in the last 40 years. Starting from a historical novel by Larsson (1985), there were also two children’s books about the cat Masse (Olsson 1987, 1988), children’s stories by Rehnström (1999, 2006, 2021), the translation of a Swedish novel (Ekman 1986/2000), stories for children by Andersson (2005, 2008, 2010, 2019), a translation of *Le Petit Prince* (Saint-Exupéry 1946/2007), an Övdalian fairytale by Götesson (2021), a series of children’s books about a cow called Mamma Mu (Wieslander 2003/2022; 2006/2022; Wieslander and Wieslander 1993/2022; 1994/2022; 1995/2022; 1997/2022), a translation of *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865/2023) and a translation of the four gospels by Lars Steensland (John – published in 1989, Mark – published in 2013, Luke – published in 2015, and Matthew – published in 2017).

⁸ Övdalian for ‘We want to/will and we can’ (lit. want.to.1.PL/will.1.PL and have.possibility.to.1.PL).

⁹ “Av de älvdalska bymålen har målet i byn Åsen, såsom varande det nästan i alla avseenden mest typiskt utbildade ock bäst bevarade, underkastats den grundligaste behandlingen.” ‘Of the Övdalian dialects, the dialect in the village of Åsen, as being the most typically formed and best preserved in almost all respects, has been subject to the most thorough treatment’ (own translation).

¹⁰ A good example here are the verb forms *djinggum* (went.1.PL) and *finggum* (got.1.PL) instead of the younger variants *djikkum* and *fikkum*.

The authors/translators who have produced most of the Övdalian literature are Inga-Britt Petersson, Pell Birgitta Andersson (both native speakers of Övdalian), Björn Rehnström (a non-native who has lived in Älvdalen for over 40 years), and Lars Steensland (a non-native, professor emeritus in Slavonic Languages and one of the greatest living experts on Övdalian). Here, it is worth noting that a substantial part of the Övdalian literature is written by non-native speakers.

The books published after 2005 are written according to the orthographic standard of Övdalian developed by *Rådđjärum*, while the book translated by a group led by Bengt Åkerberg (Ekman 1986/2000) follows Åkerberg's own orthography that in many respects differs from the *Rådđjärum* standard. The books published before 2005 follow either the orthography of the first-edition Steensland's dictionary (Steensland 1986), or follow a particular author's own orthography that is based on Swedish orthography (Larsson 1985 and Olsson 1987a, 1987b). To show the differences between the different orthographies, below I present a short extract from Larsson (1985: 34) in (9) and the same fragment in the standard orthography of the Övdalian Language Council *Rådđjärum* of 2005 (10). The differences are marked in bold.

(9) *At e' nu war an so add uort anfektad åw nod uont wäsn, wa' sästsilt klient fer e' war ju påjker so uld tag ywyr gardn eter fuorälldrum, da' dier wart uwgambler. Kullur fanns e' fel so ed rack, og dier wa' ju ba' til fe' ta fesyets sō brottdsiftader, um e' nu dsick. E' war it so litt gart ed, dō ed dsick mier eld twe kwinfuok q werr kall i sockin.*

(10) *At eð nu war an so add uortedð anfeктаð åv noð uont wäsn, war sästsjilt klient fer eð war ju påyker so uld tag yvyr gardn etter fuoreldrum, dar dier wart uvgambler. Kullur fanns eð fel so eð rakk, og dier war ju bar til fer ta fesyötj fī brottdsiftader, um eð nu djikk. Eð war it so li'tt gart eð, dā eð djikk mjer eld twär kwinnfuok q̄ werr kall i sokken.*¹¹

As mentioned above, there have been a vast number of profound changes in Övdalian during the last century. In particular, these have affected case morphology and to a slightly lesser extent syntax and phonology, while verbal inflection has changed the least. Since the phonological level is not reflected by the text (as the orthography is standardised), below I focus on the morphology and syntax. While case inflection (nominative, dative and accusative¹²) of nouns, pronouns,

¹¹ Lit.: *that it now was he.NOM/ACC that had become beset of any evil creature was especially bad for it was of.course boys that should take over farm.DEF after parents.DEF.DAT as they became very old.PL. Girls found.itself it of.course that it was.enough and they was of.course only to for to try get married.off.PL if it now went. It was not so little done it as it went more than two.PL women.folks on each man in parish.DEF.*

¹² On the genitive, see footnote 3 above.

adjectives, quantifiers and numerals was present in Classical Övdalian, Traditional Övdalian does not display the same richness of paradigms (cf. the overview of case forms in Garbacz 2010: 39–44 and in Svenonius 2015). In a corpus study, Garbacz and Johannessen (2015: 31, 34) conclude that there are only residues of case inflection and that “[...] case morphology on both nouns and pronouns has been losing ground since the period of Classical Övdalian. In this respect, Övdalian has become more like standard Swedish and the other standard Mainland Scandinavian languages” (Garbacz and Johannessen 2015: 34). They also report that “[n]one of the young informants show any use of dative” (Garbacz and Johannessen 2015: 31).¹³ This is particularly apparent from the results presented by Jacobsen (2024), who shows that for many speakers today, not only has the accusative or dative case been lost, but also the opposition between base form and oblique form. On the other hand, the verb inflection in person and number is robust, even in Modern Övdalian, as shown in Garbacz and Johannessen (2015: 28): “[...] the corpus data seem to indicate that verbal morphology in Övdalian is robust.”¹⁴ When it comes to syntax, Garbacz and Johannessen (2015: 40) found that Övdalian syntactic innovations (like referential null subjects, subject doubling, negative concord and the extended use of morphological definiteness) are found in the corpus, whereas the features inherited from Old Scandinavian as V-to-I movement and Stylistic Fronting are not. As a whole, Övdalian has become more like Swedish, while the revitalisation has often had the goal to differentiate it from Swedish, or to “revitalise or reclaim their language [i.e. Övdalian] in a more original form than the one it was transferred into through language decline and Swedish influence since the beginning of the 20th century”, as the publisher UCL Press announced on the forthcoming publication of a grammar of Övdalian by Sapir and Lundgren (UCL Press 2024). In a paper on Övdalian orthography, Forsman (2012: 87) concludes the following: “The argument put forward in the article is that many of the orthographic choices made by Råddjörum, the Övdalian Language Council, have been influenced by the overall ambition to dissociate Övdalian from the Swedish standard.” As case is perceived as a strong marker of Övdalian, one of the distinctive features that distinguishes Övdalian from Swedish, it is not surprising that the revitalisation of the case system has been a goal for the language activists. On the other hand, many – if not most – of the syntactic features are less salient and thereby less visible for those who work on the revitalisation of Övdalian.

¹³ A very similar situation is presented by Svenonius in the same volume: “There are two significant differences between this system and the one described in Akerberg (2000) and Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2006). One is the fusion of the nominative and accusative cases, and the other is the fusion of the plural definite and indefinite forms. The latter suggests an analysis in which definite and plural affixes compete for a position. In addition, the near absence of dative case endings when the noun is neither definite nor plural suggests that the contribution of suffixes in the singular has changed compared to earlier stages of the language.” (Svenonius 2015: 227)

¹⁴ The same conclusion is drawn by Helgander (2005: 20 ff.).

4. The choice of literary language

The choice of literary language is closely connected with the standardisation of Övdalian and language standardisation can, in turn, be defined as follows:

[S]tandardisation is the process of one variety of a language becoming widely accepted throughout the speech community as a supradialectal norm – the “best” form of the language – rated above regional and social dialects, although these may be felt to be appropriate in some domains. (Ferguson 1996: 189)

Although the term “standard language” in European culture is only 200–300 years old (Crowley 2003), some standardisation processes can be traced back to Ancient Greece (Colvin 2009). Standardisation is connected to purism and prescriptivism, especially in writing, and grammars and dictionaries are thus a part of it, as is the regularisation of orthography. In the European context, where all the national languages have been codified and standardised for several hundred years, the standardisation processes nowadays affect only some of the European minority languages, previously excluded from the codification processes, which are “increasingly engaging with the philosophical and political regime of standardization.” (Lane et al. 2018: 7). This is also the case for Övdalian. Given the definition of standardisation by Ferguson (1996: 189) cited above, it is apparent that standardisation implies the reduction of existing language variation. In the case of Övdalian, the development of orthography has done this at the orthographic level (levelling out the graphic representations of the phonetic differences between the villages in the area), while the grammars (Åkerberg and Nyström 2012 and Sapir and Lundgren 2024) do this at the level of morphology and – to a certain extent – syntax. The variant of Övdalian viewed to be prestigious is Classical Övdalian, as first described in Levander (1909), and later reinforced (sometimes supported by the authors’ intuitions and not solely based on the language evidence) in Åkerberg and Nyström (2012) and in Sapir and Lundgren (2024). The process of standardisation of Övdalian thus resembles the standardisation processes that have taken place for the national languages of Europe, where purism and prescriptivism have ruled, especially when it comes to a language’s written form. As one of the language activists in Älvdalen commented in a conversation with the author: “If we let go of the salient traces of Övdalian like case marking and nasal vowels, they will say we are just a Swedish dialect.” This is in line with what Lane et al. (2018: 11) conclude for minority languages: “A prescriptive standard, frequently in conjunction with some degree of legal recognition, is often the weapon of choice in struggles to resist minority status and marginalisation.”

In order to see which variant of Övdalian is used in Övdalian literature, I examined eight of the books written in or translated into Övdalian between 1985 and 2023 with respect to whether the Classical Övdalian case system was retained in them.

The method used, as these books are not a part of any text corpus, was to search for case forms by means of random sampling. Nevertheless, this method gives a sense of which nominal and verbal morphology is used in the books, which is adequate for the present study. The books were chosen to be representative of the period of time from the first novel in Övdalian to the present time. Hence, the following nine books were examined: Larsson (1985), Ekman (1986/2000), Andersson (2005), Rehnström (2006), Saint Exupéry (1946/2007), Steensland (2017), Götesson (2021), Rehnström (2021) and Carroll (1865/2023).¹⁵

The picture that emerges is that six of the books (Ekman 1986/2000, Rehnström 2006, Saint-Exupéry 1946/2007, Götesson 2021, Rehnström 2021 and Carroll 1865/2023) all retain the Classical Övdalian case system, by differentiating between case forms (nominative-dative-accusative) in both indefinite and definite noun phrases, thus retaining case oppositions and case forms that are definitely lost today, which is also the situation among the oldest/most conservative speakers.¹⁶ The indefinite forms inflected for dative and accusative are shown in (11), and the definite forms inflected for dative and accusative are shown in (12):

- (11) a) *min ienum kruppe / fann nog mulduätura* (Ekman 1986/2000: 89, 92)
 WITH A.DAT BODY.DAT / FOUND SOME FIELD.VOLS.ACC
 ‘with a body’ / ‘[he] found a few field voles’
- b) *i ienum dröme / etter nog taima* (Rehnström 2006: 36, 58)
 IN A.DAT DREAM.DAT / AFTER SOME HOURS.ACC
 ‘in a dream’ / ‘after a few hours’
- c) *min ienum biswälligum riparasiuone / Ig ar triuo wulkana*
 (Saint Exupéry 1946/2007: 11, 48)
 WITH A.DAT DIFFICULT.DAT REPARATION.DAT / I HAVE THREE.ACC VOLCANOS.ACC
 ‘with a difficult reparation’ / ‘I have got three volcanos’

¹⁵ Larsson (1985) is written in Övdalian and consists of 98 pages; Ekman (1986/2000) is a translation of the Swedish novel *Hunden* ‘The Dog’ by a working group led by Bengt Åkerberg and consists of 111 pages; Andersson (2005) is written in parallel in Övdalian and Swedish, richly illustrated, and consists of 44 pages; Rehnström (2006) is written in Övdalian by a non-native speaker, but grammatically corrected by Bengt Åkerberg (a native speaker) and consists of 93 pages; Saint Exupéry (1946/2007) is a translation from French and consists of 95 pages; Steensland (2017) is a translation by a non-native speaker and consists of 38 pages – it also contains a 2.5-page commentary on the grammatical choices made in the text; Götesson (2021) is written in Övdalian, richly illustrated and consists of 46 pages; Rehnström (2021) is written in Övdalian by a non-native speaker and consists of 81 pages, and Carroll (1865/2023) is a translation from the Swedish version of 1870, as well as from the Icelandic translation and the English original (Carroll 1865/2023: XII), while the language was proofread by Gunnar Nyström and Stefan Jacobsson (both non-native speakers), and the book consists of 128 pages.

¹⁶ This does not, however, apply to people who have learned the case category and the case forms again in adulthood.

- d) *frå ienum eststjuo'ss* /Tuov add **ien** kristallkaul (Götesson 2021: 11, 14)
 from A.DAT HORSE.CARRIAGE¹⁷ /TUVA HAD A.ACC CRYSTAL.BALL¹⁸
 'from a horse carriage' / 'Tuva had a crystal ball'
- e) *i ienum by* /*kaip ien stjyöru* (Rehnström 2021: 52, 54)
 in A.DAT VILLAGE¹⁹ /GASP A.ACC WHILE.ACC
 'in a village' / '(to) gasp a while.'
- f) *ini ienum diuopum brunne* /*daiti ien lisslan mjåan gaungg* (Carroll 1865/2023: 8, 11)
 in A.DAT DEEP.DAT WELL.DAT / THERE.IN A.ACC SMALL.ACC NARROW.ACC
 CORRIDOR
 'in a deep well' / 'into a small, narrow corridor.'
- (12) a) *min snauty* /*niwið bokkan* (Ekman 1986/2000: 73)
 WITH SNOUT.DEF.DAT / DOWN.BY HILL.DEF.ACC
 'with the snout' / 'down to the hill'
- b) *n'tter bokkam;* /*ringgum byönnungg;* (Rehnström 2006: 31)
 BELOW HILL.DEF.DAT / AROUND BEAR.CUBS.DEF.ACC
 'below the hill' / 'around the bear cubs'
- c) *n'tter bokkam;* /*Te slettj lampy.* (Saint Exupéry (1946/2007: 49)
 BELOW HILL.DEF.DAT / TO TURN.OFF LAMP.DEF.ACC
 'below the hill' / 'To turn off the lamp.'
- d) *ini raise* /*ringgum sliðån* (Götesson 2021: 13)
 IN FOREST.DEF.DAT / AROUND SLEIGH.DEF.ACC
 'in the forest' / 'around the sleigh'
- e) *i fikkun* /*firi an dar påykan* (Rehnström 2021: 47)
 IN POCKET.DEF.DAT / BEFORE HE THERE BOY.DEF.ACC
 'in the pocket' / 'before this boy'
- f) *nest diendar smådörum* /*daitað glasbuordj*
 (Carroll 1865/2023: 12)
 NEXT THEY.THERE.DAT SMALL.DOORS.DEF.DAT / THERE.TO GLASS.TABLES.DEF.ACC
 'close to these small doors' / 'to the glass tables'

When the inflection of long-syllabic weak feminine nouns (as *stjyöra* 'while' in (11e) and *snauta* 'snout' in (12 a)) is considered, the paradigm found in all these

¹⁷ Since the Övdalian compounds undergo apocope of the final vowel, the vocalic dative marking is absent.

¹⁸ Since the Övdalian compounds undergo apocope of the final vowel, the vocalic accusative marking is absent.

¹⁹ The noun *by* 'village' does not display a separate dative form in singular indefinite.

books is the same as the one of the Övdalian informant born in 1867 reported in Åkerberg (1957: 49). These books thus retain the case system in the form that was common in Övdalian more than 100 years ago. The translation of *Le Petit Prince* by Westling (Saint-Exupéry 1946/2007) goes even further in being the most conservative translation at every level, also the most syntactic, and not least in the choice of vocabulary and lexical expressions. Among other things, one finds the old possessive construction with postponed dative, see (13) and a consequent use of negative concord, see (14):

- (13) *tekkningär föfatteram* (Saint-Exupéry 1946/2007: cover)
DRAWINGS.DEF AUTHOR.DEF.DAT
'the pictures of the author'

- (14) [...] *för eð kumb it juot indjin older* (Saint-Exupéry 1946/2007: 42)
FOR IT COME NOT HERE.TO NO-ONE NEVER
'[...], as no one comes here ever.'

The translation of the Gospel of St Matthew is a special case, as its language is less conservative compared with the aforementioned five books, although Bible translations are known for their archaic style. However, Steensland (2017) has chosen a less conservative variant, from which the accusative forms and the indefinite case forms in the singular are mostly absent, and he has also commented on his choices in the references, labelling them as *eter nyera rieglum* or *eter gamblera rieglum* ('according to the newer rules' and 'according to the older rules' respectively). He explicitly states (Steensland 2017: 46) that he has chosen the more archaic language "on demand".²⁰ He uses the most conservative forms in the direct quotations from the Old Testament and in the narrative parts, whereas he renders the speech of Jesus and the learned less conservatively, by not using the accusative plural endings (-*a* in indefinite and -*q* in definite forms), not using indefinite dative forms, limited use of dative after originally dative-governing verbs, and limited use of negative concord (Steensland 2017: 46–47). When rendering the speech of "simple people", Steensland uses an even more modern language form (2017: 47). This differentiation also applies to the choices of vocabulary (Steensland 2017: 46–48). Steensland (2017: 49) states explicitly that he has differentiated between the more and less archaic forms in order to make the text more "vivid" and make use of the diversity of Övdalian, but also to show that the living language use of today is no less worthy than the classical variant of it.²¹

²⁰ *På begäran har jag denna gång använt mig mer av den klassiska grammatikens former.* 'On request, this time I have made more use of the forms of classical grammar' (own translation).

²¹ *Dels har jag velat visa att dagens levande språkbruk inte är mindre värt än det "klassiska" språket.* 'For one thing, I wanted to show that today's living language use is no less valuable than the "classical" language.'

The two books that clearly differ in terms of language from the above-mentioned six are Larsson (1985) and Andersson (2005). Andersson (2005) only retains the salient case ending *-um* for the dative plural of definite and indefinite nouns and the dative definite forms in the singular of masculine nouns, cf. (15), whereas the case category in singular and the accusative forms in plural are mostly lost, cf. (16), as is the opposition between the indefinite and the definite nominative plural (*-er/-är* respectively), cf. (17).

- (15) a) *i buðum* (expected: *i buðum*) (Andersson 2005: 7)
 IN SUMMER.PASTURES.DEF.DAT
 ‘in the summer pastures’
- b) *millø knim* (expected: *millø knim*) (Andersson 2005: 9)
 BETWEEN KNEES.DEF.DAT
 ‘between the knees’
- c) *uppter bokkam* (expected: *uppter bokkam*) (Andersson 2005: 12)
 ALONG HILL.DEF.DAT
 ‘along the hill’
- (16) a) *jåp buðferienindje* (expected: *jåp buðferienindjin*) (Andersson 2005: 3)
 HELP SUMMER.PASTURES.ASSOCIATION.DEF.NOM (EXPECTED: DEF.DAT)
 ‘(to) help the association for summer pastures’
- b) *faið kripper* (expected *faið krippa/kripp*²²) (Andersson 2005: 6)
 GOT CHILDREN.INDEF.NOM (EXPECTED: INDEF.ACC)
- c) *Dier band fast tjyrrumpø min iett snyör*
 (expected: *Dier band fast tjyrrumpu min ienum snyöre*) (Andersson 2005: 9)
 THEY TIED UP COW.TAIL.DEF.NOM WITH A.NOM/ACC ROPE
 (EXPECTED: COW.TAIL.DEF.DAT; A.DAT, ROPE.DEF.DAT)
 ‘They tied up the cow’s tail with a rope’
- (17) a) *mjotjed ferdut dier oðer tjyner* (expected: *diem oðer tjynø*) (Andersson 2005: 14)
 MILKED READY THEY.NOM OTHER COWS.DEF.NOM (EXPECTED: THEY.OBL, COWS.DEF.ACC)
 ‘[...] was ready with milking of the other cows’
- b) *mokum wið tjyner* (expected: *mokum wið tjynø*) (Andersson 2005: 16)
 MILKED WE COWS.DEF.NOM (EXPECTED: COWS. DEF.ACC)
 ‘[...] we milked the cows’

²² When the ending is apocoped due to the word position in the clause.

Larsson (1985) only retains the case endings *-um* (dative plural of definite and indefinite nouns), and in the paradigm of long-syllabic weak feminine nouns, the definite dative ending *-un*. The opposition between the indefinite and the definite nominative plural is absent, too. Interestingly, Larsson (1985) is the oldest book among those examined (and the first novel ever to be written in Övdalian), but its language is far less conservative than the language of the books produced later, including those written by non-native speakers.

5. The literary standard and its possible impact on the revitalisation process

As I have shown, contemporary Övdalian literary language differs significantly from the form of Övdalian spoken nowadays, not only by the younger generations, but also by the oldest living users. The main question is how the choice of an archaic standard impacts the preservation and revitalisation work that is being done in Älvdalen. According to Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 20), the revitalisation may be either a community-driven, bottom-up process with the potential for success, or a top-down imposition of a partly idealised, archaic language. In the case of Övdalian, the chosen archaic norm, at least when the case category is considered, seems to have support in the community, as it differentiates Övdalian even more from its closest standard relative, Swedish. For a vernacular that strives to be recognised as a separate language, standardisation and divergence is a weapon in this process of recognition. The great distance between the Övdalian spoken spontaneously today and the form of Övdalian that many activists and speakers would wish the vernacular to have, can potentially hinder the process, or at least create a need to re-learn Övdalian, partly as a foreign language. This is already happening in Älvdalen to some extent and there are reports of speakers who are afraid to use Övdalian, as they are insecure about whether the variant they speak (or write) is pure enough. In this way, the archaic norm (imposed by the speakers on themselves) may work against its main goal, which is to strengthen Övdalian: to make it used by as many as possible, as often as possible.²³ Instead, it is making Övdalian a variety which is used by fewer people and which is an exclusive language for those who are especially interested in it. On the other hand, the standardisation of a vernacular is difficult and there is no optimal way to achieve it. As stated by Lane et al. (2018: 15): “None of the cases examined here show universalisation or what might be considered an optimal implementation of the standard, regardless of whether the standard in question is five years or five decades old.” This seems to be true for Övdalian, too.

²³ Cf. the Övdalian saying *Swensk older i uonöðun* (‘Never speak Swedish unnecessarily’).

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