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# Structural Change in an Endangered Language: the Case of Gammalsvenskby

Due to the ongoing process of rapid decrease in the number of spoken languages, one of the most urgent tasks of linguistics today is to document endangered languages (Hale *et al*. 1992; Dixon 1997: 144). Among the issues associated with endangered languages, one of the most linguistically significant is the structural changes taking place within them (Campbell, Muntzel 1989; Palosaari, Campbell 2011). The general question is: what is occurring in terms of the phonetics, morphology, syntax and vocabulary of an obsolescing language? The difference between an obsolescing and a "normal" language lies in the speed of changes taking place in the language structure. Linguistic changes that, under "normal" circumstances, might take centuries can occur within just a few years in an obsolescing language (Palosaari, Campbell 2011: 111). An obsolescing language is thus, in a sense, a laboratory where processes of linguistic change can be studied at the very moment of their operation.

In my paper I will describe the linguistic situation in Gammalsvenskby, Ukraine, where a Scandinavian dialect is preserved by a number of elderly people. It is the only surviving Scandinavian dialect in the territory of the former Soviet Union (Mankov 2013). My research is based on a series of interviews with speakers of the dialect recorded during several trips to the village. The present-day dialect is represented by a number of varieties, which are accounted for by the different levels of language competence of its speakers. The main types of speakers of endangered languages, distinguished on the basis of language competence, are fluent speakers, semi-speakers and terminal speakers (Grinevald, Bert 2011); all three of these types are present in Gammalsvenskby. The "conservative" variety represented by the fluent speakers serves as a starting point in my research, while material obtained from less "conservative" speakers provides the opportunity for comparison and therefore allows us to study structural changes taking place in the dialect.

Among the grammatical features of the language of semi-speakers, the most prominent is a high frequency of free variation. In morphology, free variation implies expressing the same grammatical meaning with several interchangeable forms which occur without any regularity. Free variation takes place in the speech of fluent speakers as well but in their case, the occurence of forms is generally quite predictable (Mankov 2012). In the speech of semi-speakers, the occurrence of forms is much less predictable. Furthermore, in their speech the number of forms does not desrease but in fact it increases.

The data that forms the basis of the above observations was obtained from interviews with two semi-speakers (Emma Utas and Elsa Kozenko). In my paper I examine forms of the imperative occurring in interviews with these semi-speakers and compare them with data from interviews with fluent speakers. I have made a list of all imperative forms which occurred in interviews with semi-speakers to date, grouped them according to their morphological type and ranked them according to their frequency. The aim of my study is to show the direction of grammatical change in a certain segment of morphology and to explain the mechanism of this change.

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