



GÖTEBORGS  
UNIVERSITET



# ÖVDALIAN AND OTHER "DIALECTS" IN RELATION TO THE EUROPEAN CHARTER FOR REGIONAL AND MINORITY LANGUAGES IN SWEDEN

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# Disposition

- Background
- Preparations
- Implementation
- Conclusions
- Furthermore...



## Article 1 – Definitions

For the purposes of this Charter:

- a **"regional or minority languages"** means languages that are:
- traditionally used within a given territory of a State by nationals of that State who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the State's population; and
  - different from the official language(s) of that State;

it does not include either dialects of the official language(s) of the State or the languages of migrants;

# Background

The European Charter was adopted in 1992.

In Sweden, a Committee for minority languages was formed in 1995 (Jo 1995:03).

This Committee was placed under the Ministry of Agriculture (!), and investigated whether Sweden should adopt the European Charter.

There were **no linguists** in the Committee.

Link: [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/kommitteberattelse/minoritetsprakskommitten-jo-199503\\_gjb2jo03/](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/kommitteberattelse/minoritetsprakskommitten-jo-199503_gjb2jo03/)



WE DO IT  
FREELY AND  
FOR EVERYONE  
TO HEAR.

# Background

## Committee members (initially):

MP Carin Lundberg (s) (Finnish)

MP Ulf Kero (s) (Meänkieli/Finnish)

MP Birgitta Wichne (m)

professor Henning Johansson (Svenska  
Tornedalingars Riksförbundet) (Meänkieli)

teacher Anita Kangas (Sverigefinska  
Riksförbundet) (Finnish)

Ph. D. Susanna Angeus Kuoljok (Sametinget)  
(Sámi)

## Experts:

agency director Lars Lindgren (Nordiska  
Zigenarrådet) (Romani)

instructor Bengt Sandström (Nordiska  
Zigenarrådet) (Romani)

consultant Susanne Sznajderman Rytz  
(Judiska Centralrådet) (Yiddish)

The composition of the Committee indicates that Finnish, Meänkieli, Sámi, Romani and Yiddish had a head start...

# Preparations

The Committee engaged Kenneth Hyltenstam as an external linguistic expert – Hyltenstam being a professor in bilingualism and L2-acquisition.

Hyltenstam issued his report in 1996: *Discussion about the notions of language and dialect – with arguments about Meänkieli's position as a separate language.*

The Committee also made separate investigations about Romani, and Yiddish in Sweden.

Link to Hyltenstams report: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/07317eeae29e4b8392d25bf3a58f67dd/del-3/>

# Preparations

Hyltenstam **does not** mention the Charter in his report, and there are **no indications** that he has read it. In stead, he discusses dialects and languages from a general viewpoint, giving a historical background. As for dialects in Sweden, he says:

“Few people consider the terms language and dialect problematic. Most or all Swedes agree that Swedish, Finnish, Danish, English, French, Thai and Swahili are languages. Likewise, people agree that Gutnic, **Dalecarlian**, Gothenburgian, Bornholmian, Bergensian, Andalusian and Bavarian are dialects – of Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Spanish and German. Is is simple as long as we are talking about known situations. We have been used to calling Norwegian and Swedish two different languages, while we call Scanian and **Dalecarlian** two separate dialects.” (Hyltenstam 1996:374)

# Preparations

Hyltenstam concludes that there are seven criteria that may separate dialects from languages (1996:389). The criteria in the Charter are **not** adressed specifically.

- a dialect must be related to the language it is a dialect of.
- linguistic varieties that are mutually incomprehensible are often considered separate languages.
- linguistic varieties that are standardised and written are often considered languages.
- linguistic varieties that have official functions in a state are often considered languages.

- linguistic varieties that have no official functions in a state are often considered dialects.
- linguistic varieties that lack a written form and that are related to a standardised language are often considered dialects.
- linguistic varieties that the speakers themselves think are languages are often considered languages.

# Implementation

In the Committee's final report, it is suggested that Finnish, Sámi, Meänkieli and Romani are to be recognized as minority languages in Sweden. About "dialects", they say (1997:94ff):

"Examples of *folkmål* are Övdalian, Gutnic and Scanian."

"A reason against applying the Charter on the *folkmål* is that it is questionable whether they can be seen as languages. The general opinion is probably rather that they are dialects [...]"

"Another reason against applying the Charter on the *folkmål* is that few people use them as their everyday means of communication".

# Implementation

"The most important argument against applying the Charter on the *folkmål* is however according to our view that **this would not agree with the purpose of the Charter**. As we have said in chapter two, one of the Charter's general purposes is to strengthen the position of regional and minority languages in official institutions, such as courts, authorities, and in business. According to our opinion, **there is no reason to support old and local ways of expression such as *folkmål* by increased usage in public contexts. Furthermore, we do not think that this kind of usage in public life would support the preservation of the *folkmål*.**"

?!?!

?!?!

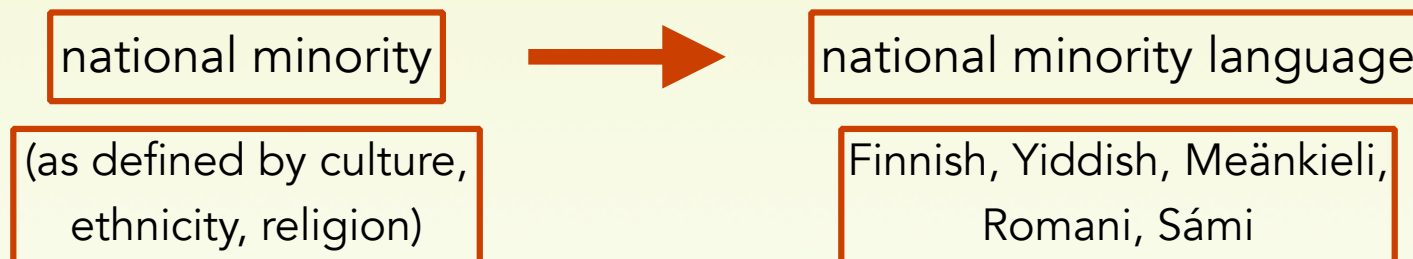
# Implementation

There are several serious problems with how the Committee handled the “dialects”:

- the Committee seems to have misunderstood the purpose of the Charter.
- there was no proper linguistic investigation of dialectal candidates for change of status.
- comments, reports, requirements and statements from several linguists and dialectal organisations were completely ignored.
- the expert (Hyltenstam) did not consider the criteria in the Charter in his report.
- the Committee also dealt with the question about national minorities, and mixed this issue with minority languages.

# Implementation

In 2009, the Law of National Minorities and Minority Languages was adopted in Sweden.



Definition of regional/minority language (the Charter): 'a traditional linguistic variety that differs from the majority language and is spoken by fewer speakers.'

Definition of minority language (Sweden): 'a linguistic variety that is spoken by a national minority.'

# Implementation

The authority that is responsible for minority languages (ISOF) regularly points to the Committee's report when asked about the status of Övdalian.

In 2017, ISOF issued a special report on the linguistic and political status of Övdalian, arguing against a recognition.

"Standardization, which would probably follow a recognition, would perhaps harm the linguistic diversity in Älvdalen."

"Övdalian differs from the Swedish standard norm."

"Deciding which variety to preserve [...] may create fragmentation among the speakers of Övdalian."

"On the other hand, there are many Swedish dialects, both within and outside of Dalecarlia, that are so different from standard Swedish that they are considered and talked about as separate languages by the speakers themselves."

# Conclusions

- while other countries have upgraded dialects following the Charter, this has not been seriously discussed in Sweden.
- the relevant authority (ISOF) is constantly arguing against investigating and/or upgrading any dialect (*contra* the Charter).
- while many grass root organizations are struggling to preserve the local linguistic varieties in Sweden, there are no signs of any positive attitudes from local or national official institutions.
- Övdalian is an exception. The local support and initiatives by linguists have led to international recognition and promising revitalization efforts.

# Furthermore...

- the notion of linguistic rights is completely absent from discussions about human rights in Sweden.
- dialects are virtually never discussed in academic or political contexts where language management etc. are relevant. **Swedish dialects are truly invisible.**

## Debating Swedish

Language Politics and Ideology  
in Contemporary Sweden

*Tommaso M. Milani*

Dissertation from 2007. The  
word *dialect* does not  
occur in the text.

Thank you for listening!

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