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## What Words Can Tell

### 1. Words as witnesses

Everybody using a language is certainly aware of the fact that words have a meaning. Words form one of the types of building blocks in human communication, the other type being the rules for the structure of the language in question, i.e. grammar. Words used in their ordinary communicative function can, however, have something more to tell apart from their basic meaning. They can also bear witness to historical and cultural events that lie outside the linguistic system.

An example illustrating this has to do with the history of the Saami in Norway and Sweden. There has been a long discussion over the years about how long there have been Saami in the southern part of their present-day area. Until the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the general opinion was that they represented the first inhabitants not only of that area but of all Scandinavia. At the end of that century the opinion was radically changed: the Saami were then seen as rather late immigrants, who did not reach the province of Jämtland until the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Wiklund 1892). On the Norwegian side of the border, the opinion was even more out-spoken: the Saami did not reach Røros before the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Nielsen 1891). To this discussion, a Saami wordlist from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century brings linguistic evidence. A certain Per Holmberger collected some 1500 words from Saami speakers and this happened – according to current opinion – Valbo near the city of Gävle, i.e. just some 200 kilometers north of Stockholm (Larsson 2005). This must be regarded as very far to the south indeed, when considering the theories about the late immigration of the Saami from the north. Nevertheless it is regarded as probable, but not proven, that Valbo was the place where Holmberger collected his Saami words.

When scrutinizing his wordlist, one will, however, find that one single word provides strong proof for the presence of Saami in this part of Sweden at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a student in Uppsala, Holmberger was for ten years a pupil of Carl von Linné's and all his life he was very interested in botany. In his wordlist there is a word *Gosen mielkien grasi*

denoting a plant; he translates it into the Latin denotation that this plant has had ever since it was first established, 'Ballota nigra'. This plant – black horehound in English – has its northern border of distribution in the Gävle area. It is quite frequent in south-east Sweden – on the islands of Gotland and Öland and in the Kalmar area – far away from Gävle. The further to the west and north, the rarer this plant is. The informants of Holmberger were certainly not experts trained in botany. They had words for the plants in their own area, whereas Holmberger himself, having studied botany, was such an expert. The Saami word *Gosen mielkien grasi* denoting black horehound means 'milkgrass of the cow' and the plant is known to have been used in popular medicine to cure cattle. Consequently, the existence of a word for black horehound (*Ballota nigra* L.) delivers a solid piece of argument in the discussion about the history of the Saami in Sweden. Furthermore, it is supported by several other words in the list, all speaking in favour of Saami presence in the Valbo farming community. There were Saami speakers only 200 kilometers north of Stockholm at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the late dating of the Saami immigration referred to above therefore seems highly improbable.

## 2. Ume Saami

Within the CAS-project *Early Networking in Northern Fennoscandia* I am working with words, but they are treated in a different way. Words constitute the main material for my investigation on Ume Saami dialect variation.

The Saami languages are widely distributed in Fennoscandia and on the Kola peninsula: all the way from the eastern part of the Kola peninsula down to Idre in northern Dalecarlia in Sweden and Røros in Norway, there are Saami speaking groups. Since the area is vast and the number of speakers low, the linguistic variation is great. Nowadays, many researchers prefer to talk about different Saami languages, the argument being that there is no mutual understanding between Saami speakers from, e.g., Härjedalen in central Sweden and the Finnmark in northern Norway. Differences can be found on all levels of the language: phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary. The different Saami languages (or dialects) are often compared to the links in a chain. Each link is interlocking in the surrounding ones, but there are no distinct borders. In other words, it is difficult to draw any sharp borderlines within the Saami language area. This leads to difficulties to answer even such a seemingly elementary question as that about the number of Saami languages (or dialects). That depends on the criteria used. This is true also for the question of where borderlines in the language continuum should be drawn.

Ume Saami is the traditional term for the dialects in Ume Lappmark, i.e. an administrative area that was not established on linguistic arguments. As could be expected, the area of this language (or dialect) is not clear-cut. The language spoken in the eastern part of Pite Lappmark, north of Ume Lappmark, shows considerable similarities with what is called Ume Saami.

Ume Saami has an intermediate position between Central and South Saami. In spite of its interesting position in the dialect chain, the information on Ume Saami language published so far is almost exclusively based on the language of one single person, that of Lars Sjulsson in the parish of Malå in the south-east corner of the Ume Saami area. His language was documented in 1941 by Wolfgang Schlachter and published in 1958 in an Ume Saami vocabulary which includes some texts in Ume Saami.

There is, however, more Ume Saami material – especially when it comes to vocabulary – in Swedish archives and libraries which enables me to study Ume Saami language variation on the basis of the language of nine villages. Furthermore, these happen to be spread rather evenly across the Ume Sami area (fig. 1). This provides the basis for an investigation into language variation, where the large collections of vocabulary make it necessary to consider the question in what way lexical variation can be used in dialect geography. Variation in the sound-system has for a long time been the favourite of dialect researchers when drawing borderlines on maps. How could words complete that picture? This question is essential, since differences in vocabulary certainly form an obstacle in communication, which is, however, not necessarily the case with phonological differences. If linguists mainly regard phonological differences in their dialect descriptions and speakers of a dialect mainly notice lexical differences, we will end up with quite different ideas about dialects.

### 3. Phonological borderlines supported by vocabulary

A traditional analysis of some phonological and morphological elements results in some borderlines through the Ume Saami area. One can, e.g., establish a division into western and eastern dialects (fig. 1), supported by, i.a., the representation of the old dental fricative *-ðð-* inside a word. In eastern dialects it is preserved, but in the western ones it has developed into *-rr-*, cf. East (Malå) *òððēt* ~ West (Southern Tärna) *oaret* 'to sleep'. The same geographical distribution can be seen also in the case of some words, e.g., the one for 'eagle': in the east *àrtnəs* but in the west *àr'čə*. Other elements show another distribution resulting in other borderlines. Most interestingly, the dialect of the village of Ullisjaur (fig.1: filled circle)

shows a lot of unique elements, in morphology and – even more so – in vocabulary. That raises questions about the extra-linguistic prerequisites for a linguistic development on its own.

#### 4. Vocabulary in focus

The rich lexical material available for Ume Saami puts vocabulary in the focus of my investigation. It provides an opportunity to consider dialect variation and different models of describing it, models to complement the traditional borderline maps dominating dialectology. Calculations of similarities and differences in vocabulary can yield a description of the close or remote relation between the dialects in different villages in the Ume Saami area. Words common to all localities are excluded, since they tell us nothing about such connections. Starting from the semantic part of the words I have registered variation in form and selected those that vary, as in the example of ‘eagle’ above. For a group of five villages, my calculations can be based on some 750 words with distribution differences. For eight localities I have some 350 words and for nine localities – the maximum in my investigation – some 150 words are used. The aim is then not to draw borderlines between villages, but to investigate which villages have words in common. Since a large number of common words can be seen as reflecting tight connections between villages and intensive contacts, this perspective on dialect differences *and similarities* will result in another picture than the traditional dialect maps, where areas are cut into pieces by borderlines dividing the area. In language use, not only differences are essential, but also elements reflecting net-works.

#### Literature

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