"We didn’t learn Swedish because Mother had no one to talk to”. A lost-generation perspective on language shift

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Although our understanding of the mechanisms in language death through (collective) shift has improved immensely due to increasing research activity in the past 40 years, one perspective which remains clearly understudied is the experience of the ‘lost generation’, i.e. the generation that never acquired fluency or even any competence in their heritage language. The lack of information about this aspect is all the more surprising, since language planning scholars have shown that children are participating agents in shaping family language policies.

This paper is part of an ongoing project examining the reasons behind the shift from Swedish to Ukrainian in Gammalsvenskby, a formerly Swedish-speaking community in southern Ukraine. After 150 years of stable multilingualism, the whole community shifted language within more or less 15 years in the 1930’s and 40’s. The paper builds on semi-structured interviews made with 20 non-Swedish-speaking persons born 1930-65, whose parents are or were Swedish-speaking. The interviews were conducted in Gammalsvenskby in August 2013.

The interviewees’ reflections on the reasons behind the shift are clearly different to those of the parent generation studied during previous fieldwork. Whereas the parents cite manifold reasons for not passing their language on to the children, the children’s accounts mainly centre on interethnic relations and the organization of society at large. The interview data will be analysed with sociolinguistic methods within language shift and FLP frameworks.

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