

Linguistic and cultural consequences of the position of English in Sweden

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Swedish is a small language with only some nine million speakers, most of them living in Sweden. Sweden is however a country where international contacts are highly valued. Because Swedish is such a small language and not much spoken or taught outside Sweden (apart from a small Swedish-speaking minority in western Finland) it has extremely limited usefulness as a medium for international communication. There is a certain degree of mutual comprehensibility between the Nordic languages Swedish, Norwegian and Danish (with some training and a lot of good will), but otherwise any kind of communication between Swedish speakers and non-Swedish speakers will most often take place in English. English is the default language for international communication, both in Sweden and outside its borders.

The reasons for this are several. One reason is that the general level of proficiency in English in Sweden is quite high. English is widely taught in Sweden. From the age of about seven, when children enter primary school they learn English. At first their English lessons are mostly songs and games in English, but their skills grow quite rapidly. Children in Sweden hear a good deal of English outside of the school environment, on television, in films and in music, and this forms a very significant part of their exposure to the language. In Sweden there is no dubbing of television or film. By the time they reach upper secondary school, which they attend between the ages of 16 and 19, many Swedish young people are highly proficient users of English. They often speak English with a slight American accent, despite the fact that the teaching materials used in class, as well as their own teachers, usually model a southern British accent.

But the widespread myth that “all Swedes speak English” is quite an overstatement. Even among the young people studying at the upper secondary level, far from all of them will be fluent

speakers of English. Even among those who achieve the highest grades, there are many whose shyness makes them unwilling to participate in conversations in English. Other students simply lack the fluency that they would need to take part in general conversation. Among those who are no longer students the situation is even worse, and while the majority of Swedish adults can follow English conversation, many would be unwilling or unable to participate actively themselves. Swedes over the age of 55 may not have studied English at any stage of their education. (German was the first foreign language studied before English usurped its position.)

While not all Swedes are able or willing to communicate in English, those who do have this proficiency are using English more and more. Many people in Sweden are having to improve their proficiency in English to keep up with new requirements from their employer. In some international companies English is the corporate language and is used for all communication within the company, even between two Swedish executives. In Sweden's function as an EU state, discussion and negotiation often take place in English, despite the fact that translation facilities are available (Phillipson 2003). In education, university and upper secondary level courses are increasingly often offered in English, or at least require the student to be able to use English course literature.

The result of this increase in the use of English in Sweden is that it may actually become difficult to talk about certain areas of endeavour in Swedish. If most communication about, for example, political science or astrophysics takes place in English, Swedish terminology will not be developed in these fields which will in turn mean that it is impossible to discuss the subjects without the use of English terminology. To those used to discussing these matters in English, this need for English in Swedish discourse may become absurd, making it a good deal easier simply to switch to English entirely. For every domain where English grows in importance, Swedish becomes less useful.

It is possible to see a progression in the displacement of Swedish by English in domain after domain. An initial stage is that English terminology is used in Swedish discourse. The next stage may then be that knowledge of Swedish is no longer essential, when most discussion of a topic is

in English. The final stage may be that Swedish is no longer admissible as it becomes more and more difficult to talk about advanced topics in Swedish.

A relevant question in this context is then if Swedish will stop developing entirely. The lexicon of Swedish is already failing to develop in many fields of endeavour. All writing is in English. New terms are coined in English. There is then no need for new Swedish terminology. There is however resistance to this process.

When computers came to be common in Sweden, there was a need for new words to talk about such basic functions as saving documents or printing them out. Initially, the English word was simply made Swedish to fit into an otherwise Swedish discourse, so that the English *print* became the Swedish *printa*, and the English *save* became the Swedish *sejva*. While this may not have been a problem as long as there were only a few experts who used computers, it was not acceptable when most Swedish people came to need to use and talk about computers and their functions. There is now what is called Datatermgruppen¹ – the Computer terminology group, made up of representatives of many academic and business IT-users as well as the Swedish Language Council² and hosted by the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. This group makes it their business to recommend Swedish terms for computer terminology.

Some of the new terminology may look like English but may actually not be derived from terms used in the English-speaking world. The abbreviation *SMS* – short message service, a service available on cell phones, is not commonly used in English where *texting* or *text message* is the usual term. Yet young users of Swedish have created the verb form *messa* (to send a text message, via, *SMS:a* [esemesa]).

There has in recent years been an increased interest in English-language schooling. In many Swedish towns and cities classes are being started where some or all of the teaching is in English. These classes are mostly for teenagers (Lower and Upper Secondary level schools). Many, if not most of the children in these classes have grown up with Swedish as their first and only language

¹ <http://www.nada.kth.se/dataterm/>

² <http://www.spraknamnden.se/>

and speak Swedish at home. Others may know almost no Swedish, being children of visiting academics or the like; they may or may not have English as their native language. A third group are bilingual in Swedish and English, and often speak both languages at home.

The effects of this development on the development of the students' proficiency in English and in Swedish have not been much studied. Informal observation has shown that Swedish parents may choose to place their teenagers in an English school environment for various reasons. In some cases they and/or their child believe that the child's fluency in English will be enhanced by English-language schooling and that this will be an advantage to the child in the future. In some cases the concern may be to maintain English proficiency acquired during a period of residence in an English-speaking country. In other cases the parents and/or the child may be interested in the possibility of meeting others who might be useful contacts in the future. In yet other cases, parents and/or the children might hope for a quieter, more studious environment in an international school where many parents are guest lecturers at universities.

Parents who are in Sweden for a short period only may feel that an international school is the best choice for their child, even if the child speaks little or no English on arrival in Sweden. Rather than spending a year learning Swedish in a preparatory class, parents feel the child would be better served spending the time learning English. Parents who are raising their children with both Swedish and English may see bilingual classes as an obvious choice where they are available. In all cases it is likely that parents and their children believe that English-language schooling will benefit the linguistic development of the young person, improving their English while not damaging any Swedish –language skills they may have.

This kind of English-medium classes with Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are growing in popularity, despite indications of problems. A Swedish study (Washburn 1997) suggested that students on these programmes did not actually learn English any better than students in comparable Swedish-medium classes. In addition, their Swedish skills were impaired and their subject knowledge was less than that of students in compared classes. Hyltenstam (2004) questions the value of English-medium schooling for Swedish speaking students, and

points out that the teaching of subject content in English is not the answer to the genuine need for increased competence in English among Swedish speakers.

In Sweden, English has achieved the same status as Swedish and maths in primary schools. It is no longer appropriate to talk of the “three Rs” reading writing and ‘rithmetic. In Sweden, being able to communicate in English is viewed as almost as important a basic skill as literacy and numeracy. Students need to pass lower secondary English to be allowed to enrol on upper secondary programmes.

In higher education too, English is taking more space. “International” programmes (read English-medium) are growing in popularity. At many Swedish universities it is possible to study anything from Political Sociology to Industrial Engineering through English. Here too, English is assumed as a basic skill. Text books may be in English even in Swedish-medium courses. Yet students do not perform as well in English as in their L1, Swedish (Hadenius 2003).

The Swedish Government has recently released a language proposition³ stipulating that more doctoral theses must be written in English. Yet people writing in a second language cannot be expected to have the same level of linguistic sophistication as those who write in their first language. In seminars and lectures the students who dare to actively participate may not be those who are best prepared or who have most knowledge, but rather those whose English language skills are best. Many Swedish young people may be excluded from higher education because their level of English is not sufficient.

At present, English does not have any official status in Sweden. It is taught as a foreign language, and until recently it has been possible to do anything in Sweden without English. But this is changing. As Swedish relinquishes domains to English there may be consequences. If English is an essential part of Swedish life its status has changed, and it may no longer be appropriate to insist on the British or American native-speaker as the only model for Swedish speakers learning English. As English becomes more and more one of the languages spoken in Sweden, it is

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http://www.regeringen.se/download/d32f62b5.pdf?major=1&minor=50761&cn=attachmentPublDuplicator_0_attachment

inevitable that the Swedish variety of English will become more accepted in education and in society at large. After all, if Irish English or New Zealand English are accepted varieties, why should it be any less appropriate for Swedish speakers to show their origin in the English they speak?

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