

Standardisation and standard language in Sweden

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The Swedish language has a long and varied history of standardisation. More detailed surveys of the subject have been provided, in particular by Gun Widmark (1992) and Ulf Teleman (2003), and my background sketch will build to a large extent on their accounts. Other themes that will be considered in this brief overview are competing ideologies surrounding standardisation and the relationship of the media and the language of young people to Standard Swedish.

THE WRITTEN STANDARD

Like Danish and Norwegian, Swedish came into being in a North Germanic dialect continuum where, to begin with, there were neither linguistic nor national boundaries. The first surviving evidence of a distinct (but far from uniform) Swedish language is provided by Viking Age runic inscriptions from the 9th century AD onwards. Early traces of dialect divisions within Swedish are to be found, for example, between the tribes of the *svear*, or Swedes (in the provinces around present-day Stockholm and to the north) and the *götar*, or Geats (to the south and west of that region). Situated within the *götamål* dialect area was Vadstena (some 250 km south of Stockholm), which, with its abbey, became an important centre in the late Middle Ages for the production of texts and hence for the standardisation of written Swedish. Here, in the 14th and 15th centuries, religious texts were translated and copied on an almost industrial scale (cf. Wollin 2005). By the time the first Bible translation appeared in the early part of the 16th century (when it could also be distributed in print), Stockholm had long been the undisputed religious and political centre of the country. This period marks the transition from *Old Swedish* to *Early Modern Swedish*.

During the 17th century, the church saw to it that the entire population received instruction in the art of reading. A more widespread ability to write, however, would not emerge until some way into the 19th century. As the kingdom expanded in the course of the 17th century, it also became important to construct a glorious past for the national language and to assert its position against other tongues like Latin, German and French. As early as around 1700, individual pioneers introduced academic lectures in Swedish (Ronge, Tjäder and Widmark 1999), and, helped along by institutions such as the Academy of Sciences (1724) and the Swedish Academy (1786), Swedish now began to establish itself as the language of both science and letters, at the expense of Latin.

The appearance of Olof Dalin's groundbreaking weekly *Then Swänska Argus* (The Swedish Argus) in 1732 ushered in a new era in the development of the language, *Late Modern Swedish*. The fact that until as late as 1766 all secular publications had to be approved by a royal censor had something of a normative effect, but more important in the standardisation of written Swedish were private printing and publishing houses (Santesson 1986). By the beginning of the 19th century, the written language was essentially standardised. Although it did of course continue to develop, the norm remained largely stable. The decisive step came with Carl Gustaf af Leopold's *Afhandling om Svenska stafsättet* (Treatise on Swedish Spelling), published by the Swedish Academy in 1801.

Before the 19th century was at an end, Adolf Noreen had formulated the maxim of language cultivation that has subsequently guided the standardisation of Swedish down to the present day. He called it the *principle of fitness for purpose*, by which he meant that, the more a language simplified communication, the fewer misunderstandings it caused and the easier it was to learn, the better that language was (Noreen 1895). Today, Noreen's aim may seem innocent enough, but at the turn of the last century it was considered radical and provoked ideological debate. Sven-Göran Malmgren (2010) has illustrated this with examples from different editions of the Swedish Academy's one-volume dictionary, *Svenska Akademiens ordlista* (SAOL, first published in 1874).

A manifestation of a *historical* approach to language, for instance, was Academy member Johan Erik Rydqvist's opposition to the pronoun *den* ('it') in anaphoric reference to inanimate words with older grammatical gender (*duken* 'the cloth' – *han* 'he' and *boken* 'the book' – *hon* 'she'). Only in its 8th edition (1923) did SAOL stop indicating in entries for such words whether the noun in question was masculine or feminine. A *purist* approach is probably reflected in the fact that, in the first five editions of the dictionary, 'thousands of well-established loanwords...were omitted, e.g. *absolut* 'absolute(ly)', *abstrakt* 'abstract', *acceptera* 'accept' and *analys* 'analysis' (p. 275). Not until the 6th and above all the 7th edition (1900) were borrowings such as these admitted.

As an example of *functionally* motivated guidance of the language, Malmgren mentions that, right up to the 9th edition (1950), SAOL resisted the change in spelling from *godt* to *gott* (neuter inflection of the adjective *god* 'good') decided on by the Swedish Parliament in 1906, in order to maintain the coherence of the inflectional paradigm. Malmgren describes as *demographic* the kind of guidance which meant that the dictionary only stopped giving the plural forms of verbs (*de gå* 'they go'; *vi gingo* 'we went') in its 10th edition (1973), even though they had been extinct in speech since the 18th century and rare in writing since at least the late 1940's. The Academy's argument in this case was that it did not wish to contribute unnecessarily to generational differences in language. Both the last-mentioned approaches (functional and demographic) can of course just as easily be seen as manifestations of a historical (conservative) view of language. *Educational* motives were behind the Swedecised spellings of the 8th edition, such as *skaut* and *visky* (for *scout* and *whisky*), but by the next edition these had disappeared.

The 6th edition of SAOL (1889) was the last one officially adopted by Parliament as a norm for schools. To this day, however, the dictionary – now in its 13th edition (2006) – is regarded as an unofficial guide to the vocabulary, spelling and inflection of Swedish. Since 1906, there has been no spelling reform bearing the royal seal; the one introduced that year replaced the spellings *hv*, *fv* and *f* for the *v*-sound (*hvad* 'what', *blifva* 'become', *haf* 'sea') with *v*, and substituted *-tt* or *-t* for *-dt* spellings of adjectives (*godt*, cf. above) and participles (*kalladt* 'called'). Clearly, Sweden does not have a great deal of experience of official standardisation of its language – even when it comes to written Swedish.

THE SPOKEN STANDARD

A commonly held view is that, down to the 16th century, the spoken language of Sweden was characterised by considerable geographical, but fairly insignificant social variation. Noblemen and peasants from the same area spoke in largely the same way. With the emergence of a nation state under Gustav Vasa and his sons in the 16th century, social differences grew. The nobility became a class of officials, many of whom spent extended periods in the capital Stockholm. Through mutual mixing of dialects, and under the influence of written Swedish, an embryo of a standard spoken language developed (Lindström 1993). Internal contacts between towns – especially along the Baltic Sea coast – gave rise early on to a kind of urban

koine (Teleman 2007: 175). That language probably had similarities to what some sources refer to as ‘court Swedish’ (*hovsvenska*, Widmark 2000). It also served as a kind of *lingua franca* when there was a need to bridge dialect differences in other parts of the country. The spoken Swedish of public authority which ordinary country folk had previously come into contact with consisted primarily of readings of conservative written language in conjunction with attendance at church – of Bible passages from the pulpit and royal proclamations outside the church door.

The struggle between *talsvenska* (a cultivated colloquial Swedish) and *boksvenska* (‘book Swedish’) for acceptance as the spoken standard norm would assume great importance in the course of the 19th century. The former was the conversational language of the more fashionable drawing rooms of Stockholm, while the latter, more closely tied to written Swedish, was promoted on the one hand by teachers in the public elementary schools (established in 1842), and on the other by popular movements seeking to win the language of the public domain for their members (Josephson 1991). Both teacher training colleges and the popular movements’ study circles recruited primarily among ordinary people without educational traditions.

Eminent philologists like Adolf Noreen and Gustaf Cederschiöld had a deep concern for the problems of the schools and wanted to remove one of the obstacles to young pupils by working for closer agreement between the spoken and written languages. Their approach was to adapt writing to speech, and not to defend the writing-based pronunciation known, somewhat condescendingly, as ‘schoolteacher Swedish’. Accordingly, both Cederschiöld and Noreen called for more space to be given to cultivated colloquial Swedish, and in addition Noreen wanted to see a greater emphasis on stylistics in the curriculum, to enable pupils to broaden their repertoires and develop their feeling for style. Noreen also founded an orthographic society that advocated a radical reform of spelling.

The standard spoken language that finally became established in Sweden was something of a compromise between cultivated colloquial and book Swedish. Or rather, book Swedish probably won the day, but by then the written language that served as its model had already incorporated a good many features of cultivated colloquial speech, such as singular verb forms with plural subjects and contractions such as *ta* ‘take’ and *ge* ‘give’ for *taga* and *gifva*. The result was radical in the sense that the norm of accepted speech now became accessible – through writing – to anyone who could read. The loser was the hidden and capricious norm of cultivated colloquial Swedish, which had only been transmitted orally among the better families of the Mälaren provinces, and which tended to exclude and even stigmatise speakers with other backgrounds and with a reading pronunciation.

By far the most important consequence of this breakthrough for book Swedish, however, was that it provided a fixed normative principle for standard speech, a principle that was consolidated and reinforced in the 20th century: namely, that what we conceive of as correct spoken Swedish is in many respects guided by the written language (rather than vice versa). The doyen of language cultivation, Erik Wellander, wrote about this in his book *Riktig svenska* (Correct Swedish) from 1939 (p. 13): ‘Our mother tongue has probably never, in its incalculably long development, experienced so profound a transformation.’

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Three key tendencies in the development of Swedish during the 20th century were a convergence of speech and writing, levelling of dialects, and growing Anglicisation.

It is often claimed that the written language has continued to serve as a model for standard spoken Swedish, and chiefly of course as regards phonological and morphological features – one example being the tendency for weakened variants such as *flicker* ‘girls’, *huse* ‘the house’ and *dansa* ‘danced’ to make way for the full forms of written Swedish, *flickor*, *huset* and *dans-*

sade. Eva Sundgren (2004), in her follow-up of Bengt Nordberg's study of the urban language of Eskilstuna in the 1960s, has shown that, in the regional speech of central Sweden, this development is neither without exceptions nor particularly rapid. More evident, probably, is the influence of the spoken language on the written, and the elements in the melting pot here are above all syntax and choice of words or word forms. Standard Swedish has become markedly more informal – a shift clearly exemplified in more recent times by the 'du reform' of the 1970s, which generalised use of the familiar form of address. As a result, words, forms and constructions previously regarded as colloquial or everyday (such as *inte* 'not', *också* 'also', *sa* 'said', instead of the older forms *icke/ej*, *även* and *sade*) are now stylistically neutral and hence the normal variants of the written language. The trend towards simpler sentence structure really gathered momentum after the Second World War, when the evening newspapers, anxious to boost their circulations, embarked on a campaign to improve readability.

As early as the closing years of the 19th century, burgeoning industrialisation and urbanisation were beginning to pose a threat to old rural dialects. There is much to suggest, though, that the critical turning point came in the 1950s and 1960s. The dialects of more peripheral provinces (northern Norrland, Värmland and Gotland) were worst affected, a possible reason for this being that that was where, in the mid-20th century, unemployment was highest and the exodus to the industrial towns of central Sweden most inexorable (Thelander 1985). The levelling and disappearance of dialects have also been linked to the influence of the media and education, a suggestion which Dahlstedt (1970) has rejected as a less plausible explanation than geographical and social mobility. For people to abandon their dialects and thus break with established patterns of language choice in their local communities, he argued, it would surely take more than simply to provide them with a model of what the standard language sounded like.

Over the course of the 20th century, Swedish – like other languages in the Nordic region – was exposed to the influence of English. As long as this influence is confined to the borrowing of individual words and constructions, it is not a matter of concern to language cultivators and planners. Experience of earlier and larger waves of loan words (chiefly from Low German and French) tells us that imported words tend either to be integrated or to disappear again; Swedish as a language system is scarcely threatened. What has been taken far more seriously from a language planning point of view is the danger of Swedish losing domains of use to English more or less entirely, including areas such as research and higher education, certain aspects of popular culture, and so on. This problem was one of the factors prompting a Swedish government inquiry that resulted in 2002 in the report *Mål i mun* (English summary: *Speech: Draft action programme for the Swedish language*).

NEW TENDENCIES

As a result of the governmental inquiry, Sweden has, since 2007, had a strengthened language planning structure and, since 2009, a Language Act. The role of the Language Council of Sweden (*Språkrådet*) – which replaced the Swedish Language Council (*Svenska språknämnden*) – is not restricted to Swedish, but covers the languages used in Sweden, i.e. also including the five official minority languages (Finnish, Sami, Meänkieli, Romani, and Yiddish), Swedish Sign Language and various immigrant languages (with an emphasis on status rather than corpus planning). One of the aims of the Language Act was to safeguard Swedish as a 'complete language, serving and uniting our society'.

As I tried to show in Thelander 2009, interest in Standard Swedish is fairly lukewarm in Sweden today. A conceivable explanation could be that standardisation has now progressed so far and people are so secure in their use of language that further discussion is quite simply

felt to be superfluous. Subconscious attitudes on the part of language users to different ways of speaking Swedish, however, are one area that needs to be studied more closely.

The broadcast media may not have been the decisive reason for the decline of Sweden's dialects, which have lost both domains of use and speakers. But they have been of enormous significance for the Swedish population's familiarity with the prevailing standard norm – for the standardisation of the standard language, as it were. Into the 1960s, radio and television were a stronghold of standard spoken Swedish in the public sphere. The personalities given access to the airwaves were normally highly educated, and virtually everything that was broadcast was either read out, rehearsed or carefully prepared (Svensson 2005). Most standardised in linguistic terms were news programmes, and as late as 1976 strong reactions and heated debate ensued when a newsreader with a southern Swedish intonation and a back *r* was heard on radio (*ibid.*). Today, broadcasters tend, rather, to make a point of giving exposure to presenters or newsreaders with either a regionally coloured pronunciation or a foreign accent. Bruce (2010: 218f.) even notes that there are special expressions for mixed dialects that are recognised from the radio. Thus, *P1-skånska* ('P1 Scanian', P1 being one of the public service radio channels) refers to a way of speaking that combines central Swedish speech sounds with a southern Swedish intonation. *Kundradio-svenska* ('in-store radio Swedish'), on the other hand, involves a mix of southern Swedish pronunciation features (diphthongised vowels and back *r*) and a central Swedish intonation pattern.

But as important as radio and television initially were as guardians of a strict and well-articulated standard norm, just as important did they become as arenas for linguistic diversity and disseminators of new words and expressions, once the ice was broken. That happened when the growing informality of the 1970s found its way into Swedish public service broadcasting and when, in the 1990s, commercial and local channels with no other ambitions than to entertain (and sell) were also given broadcasting licences. Completely new programme formats appeared, often involving ordinary people and with spontaneous conversations between guests and between guest and presenter as a typical scenario. We ended up with what Eva Mårtensson (1998) has called 'private conversations in public'. Unfortunately, little research has been done on the tangible implications of the media for the development of Swedish today (Svensson 2005: 1802f.).

This revolution in the form and impact of the broadcast media in the closing decades of the 20th century was of course not confined to Sweden. It was if anything global, and the same can probably be said of the invasion of the public sphere by the new younger generation, which has coincided in an interesting way with the transformation of the media. Whereas sparse settlement conserves language (as children and young people have to rely more or less entirely on their parents as linguistic models), a higher density of population is assumed to favour an independent, creative youth culture that develops and changes language (Teleman 2007). Concentration of the population is very much a characteristic of Sweden at the beginning of the 21st century. As well as wanting to be seen and heard, young people are a trend-sensitive target group for advertisers, and one with money to spend: 'A public cult of youthfulness, spontaneity and "naturalness" developed and resulted in an increased representation of the young generation in media and advertisement' (Teleman 2003: 426).

By this reasoning, the youth language of Stockholm ought to be well placed both to lead change in spoken Swedish and to be the variety which, with the media's help, reaches the country at large. In her account of the speech of young Stockholmers, Ulla-Britt Kotsinas (1994) has noted, in particular, their use of slang, 'unnecessary' particles such as *typ* 'like' or the quotation marker *ba* (from *bara* 'only, just'), and certain features of pronunciation. In a comparison with the role of 'Low Copenhagen' dialect in Denmark (Kristiansen 2009), it is interesting that the youth of Stockholm rarely seem to take over the speech habits associated with the traditional 'Low Stockholm' variety (*ekenssnack*), such as the merger of long *e* and *ä* in words like *leka* 'play' and *läka* 'heal', or rounded pronunciation of long *a* in words such as

tavla ‘picture, board’. Pronunciations identified in Kotsinas’s study as the principal characteristics of young people’s speech are more often features that have appeared in Stockholm relatively recently and that were originally part of more or less neighbouring dialects outside the capital, such as fricativisation of long *i* and *y* (*vin* ‘wine’, *flyga* ‘fly’) and open pronunciation of *ä* and *ö* in positions other than before *r* (*kläder* ‘clothes’, *röka* ‘smoke’).

Opening of *ä* and *ö*, and to some extent back articulation of *sj*, have spread in a remarkably short time to young language users across much of the country. In her thesis on the pronunciation of vowels in Swedish dialects, Leinonen (2010: 198) confirms that it is becoming part of standard spoken Swedish no longer to maintain the allophonic distinction between an *r*-variant and an *r*-less variant of *ä* and *ö*. Such a development would simplify the vowel system of the language. A syntactic detail that has gained ground with the same astonishing speed, in written as well as spoken Swedish, is the dropping of the obligatory infinitive marker (*att*) in the future-forming auxiliary verb phrase *kommer att* ‘will, is going to’. Where that change began is difficult to ascertain, but it cannot be ruled out that it is through the youth language of Stockholm that it has gathered momentum. One could get the impression that, while linguistic innovations do not need to originate in Stockholm to be successful, they do have to pass through the capital to spread effectively to other parts of the country (and perhaps also to gain a foothold in the standard language). It seems to be in Stockholm, in other words, that innovations ‘catch their connection’ (via the media) to the rest of Sweden.

It is still the case, of course, that dissemination among the younger generation is no guarantee that a linguistic feature will also become established in the standard language. Many peculiarities of a multi-ethnic suburban youth language such as Rinkeby Swedish, for example, seem to have difficulty both achieving a wider geographical impact and accompanying its speakers into adulthood (Kotsinas 1994: 168f.; Bruce 2010: 221f.).

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