

The Spread of Global English: Implications for Sweden

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Introduction

In his study of “Language and National Identity”, Hill (2010) concludes that “[l]anguage is not only a means of communicating a particular content. Language also creates a community based on common experiences, common symbols and common values. Through language people identify with a particular community... [and] [i]n many countries the national language is the most powerful symbol of the nation” (p. 111). Modiano (2009) elaborates on the relation between culture and language, stating that “[...] the way in which people use language is an integral component of what constitutes cultural distinctiveness. Individuals belonging to groups collectively favor behaviors which are characteristic for the group because this reinforces their ability and need to celebrate a sense of belonging and uniqueness” (Modiano, 2009, p. 143).

Considering Hill’s (2010) findings of language as a means of building community and national unity, as well as Modiano’s (2009) comments about the relation between language and reinforcing group identity, how does the present-day spread of English in Sweden affect this? If it is true that national identity and national language interrelate, can English then be perceived as a threat to Swedish national identity in this sense?

The aforementioned questions will act as the foundation upon which this essay will be built. The main aim of the essay, then, will be to explore and summarize previous research that has been done on this subject in the field of sociolinguistics in order to establish whether or not English is perceived as a threat to Swedish at all, and if it is, whether or not this can validly be linked to an experienced loss of national identity.

Concerns for English Teachers

All over the world, the way in which language is being used is shifting, and Sweden is no exception. Hult (2005) discusses an important Swedish language policy called *Mål i mun*, in which a form of acceptance is being shown that Sweden has discontinued being a monolingual country. Instead, the policy advocates that Sweden must advance as a multilingual nation-state (Hult, 2005). But what does this mean exactly? And what is English in Sweden today? Is it still a foreign language? Is it a second language? Is it a national language? All of these questions, which are undoubtedly relevant for English teachers in Sweden, have yet to be answered.

Moreover, Lalander & Johansson (2002) point out that global influences, to a growing extent, affect the establishing of group-cultures in Sweden today, especially so for adolescents. At the same time, English, as Modiano (2009) expresses it, “[...] is destined, at least in the first decades of the 21st century, to reign supreme as our universal medium of communication” (Modiano, 2009, p. 80). As a result, English will more often than not be an integral part in establishing adolescent group-cultures in Sweden today; something that English teachers in Sweden naturally must take into account.

In reading this essay and attaining more knowledge of how English is gaining ground in Sweden and what implications this process may have on Swedish people’s sense of national identity, English teachers in Sweden may feel better prepared in dealing with some of these concerns moving forward.

Domain Loss

Sundgren (2007) explains that domain loss occurs when a language loses an area or domain where it has previously been dominant to another language, for example when it is no longer possible to use that particular language for specific subjects or in certain situations. Swedish domain loss to English is a well-documented fact, especially so in the academic world (Hultgren, Gregersen & Thøgersen, 2014). In fact, the number of articles published in English at Nordic universities is estimated to be at 70-95%, while for doctoral theses that figure rises to 80-90% (Hultgren et al., 2014).

In turn, this on-going domain loss has led to two different discourses, which Hultgren et al. (2014) refer to as the internationalist and culturalist discourses. Within the internationalist discourse, an internationally competitive nation is being advocated (Hultgren et al., 2014). In this discourse, the debate concerning international and national language is seen as a “[...] non-issue” (Hultgren et al., p. 2). As a contrast to the internationalist discourse, within the cultural discourse it is argued that national language has to be safeguarded in order to protect the nation-state and shield it against international forces such as commercialization and global homogenization (Hultgren et al., 2014).

The deduction that can be made from this is that the opinion on the effects of domain-loss to English and its relation to the importance or non-importance of national language is intrinsically linked to the ambitions of the different politicians and institutions which take part in the debate. Additionally, Salö (2014) explains that in Sweden, this debate concerning domain loss finally led to a

language policy aim... [being] formulated to the effect that Swedish should be a “complete and society-bearing language”. The phrasing is important, as it appeared several years after the coining of “domain loss”, and was later to reappear in several important language policy documents. In essence, it sets the objectives toward which domain loss poses a threat. It is through this rationalization that domain loss has its *raison d'être* as a representation of a linguistic problem (p. 95)

Finally, Melander (2000) provides some ambiguity to all this, stating that while domain loss does have a negative impact on languages in general and that Swedish is no exception, English's foothold of Swedish is not large enough to assume that a wide-ranging linguistic shift is going to happen any time soon.

Nationalism in Sweden

In order to understand how the growth of English in Sweden affects people's sense of national identity, it first seems necessary to establish a general understanding of how nationalism is perceived and adapted in Sweden.

Andersson (2009) discusses Sweden's equivocal relationship to Europe in relation to this, stating that Sweden happily exports its national model to the rest of Europe, whose culture is “perceived as Catholic, conservative and latently corrupt” (p. 241), but is not as eager to adapt European models as it is to provide its own. Salö (2014) continues this discussion by stating that while Swedish nationalism can be understood as something positive, in its close ties to “mainstream ideals of civic unity and political sovereignty” (p. 99), it concurrently bears ties to negative connotations such as cultural homogeneity and racism. As a result of this intersectional nature of Swedish nationalism, Salö (2014) points out that people who actually do strive to reinforce nationalistic values almost always decline when asked if they consider themselves nationalists. With this in mind, attempting to draw

parallels between presumptuous ideas of nationalism and the debate of the growth of English in Sweden seems unproductive.

National Identity

Instead of examining nationalism in Sweden then, what becomes interesting to discern is how large a factor national identity plays in people's identity as a whole. Blommaert (2005) comments on this, stating that forces of globalization are decreasing the value of the nation-state in people's developing of identity. Despite this decrease in value, state discourses on identity are referred to, in which the state remains an important factor in establishing identity (Blommaert, 2005). One of the main reasons for this is that the state is said to provide a necessary two-way dynamic in establishing identity, more specifically in providing contrast between 'us' and 'the rest of the world' (Blommaert, 2005).

In applying this concept to Sweden, several problems arise. First, due to the previously mentioned sensitivity of nationalism in Sweden (Salö, 2014), the value of contrasting what is Swedish to what is not, inherently decreases. Second, due to the symbolic value of the Swedish population possessing a high proficiency in English compared to other countries where English is not an L1 (Linn & Oakes, 2007), a Swede's high proficiency in English has come to be perceived as something particularly Swedish (Oakes, 2001). Linn and Oakes (2007) go on by stating that in terms of language hierarchy in Sweden, English is positioned at the top, and is "[...] thus acting as a sort of linguistic trump card for the purposes of generating a positive national identity" (p. 60)

If proficiency in English in Sweden is seen as a trait of Swedish national identity, where high proficiency contributes positively to the sense of national identity, then the state discourse on contrast that Blommaert (2005) discusses simply holds no value in Sweden.

Summarily, then, the importance of national identity as a whole is being reduced due to globalization (Blommaert, 2005), while at the same time, developing a high proficiency in English in Sweden contributes positively to Swedish national identity (Linn & Oakes, 2007). Together, all of this points to national language becoming a less important figure in establishing national identity as a Swedish citizen today.

Conclusion and Future Questions

The result of this research summary appears to be twofold. On the one hand, there are linguistic implications of Swedish losing certain domains to English and the structural hierarchy of languages shifting in Sweden. On the other hand, there are personal and human implications, related to the debate of what English actually is in Sweden today and what it might become in the future.

Furthermore, if Hill's (2010) sentiment is true, that a shared national language plays a crucial part in the establishing of national identity, then it is easy to recognize the spread of English in Sweden as a type of divider of the nation. Contrastively, Blommaert's (2005) as well as Linn & Oakes' (2007) findings point toward relatively undiscovered ground, of how the process of globalization is decreasing the importance of national identity as a whole and how speaking English is being realized as a characteristic of being Swedish.

For teachers of English in Sweden, it is important to be aware of all of these factors and assisting pupils and students in gaining awareness of what English actually is in the world and what it is in Sweden. Additionally, upper-secondary pupils with the ambition of pursuing higher education will be given a crucial advantage if teachers make sure that they are well-

prepared for the realistic conditions in Swedish universities today, where proficiency in English is essential to persisting.

To end, some thoughts that have arisen throughout this essay will be formulated as questions to simply think about or investigate in future research:

- How does a multilingual nation-state affect national identity? Can several languages co-exist as benefactors of national identity?
- What is English? Who does it belong to? Is it an international language or an Anglo-Saxon one?
- Must Swedish be preserved and safeguarded? Must actions be taken to re-establish Swedish in the domains that it is losing to English?
- What is English to Swedish adolescents? How do they use it? How can teachers use this to their advantage in the classroom?

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