

EAFTELETO Symposium

“National Languages and Terminology in Higher Education, Science & Technology”

Athens, Greece, 7 November 2013

A Swedish perspective

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The status of Swedish in higher education institutions

There are 46 higher education institutions in Sweden. The Government is the accountable authority for 33 of them. Others are private foundations¹.

There is no official regulation or decree in Sweden that states that Swedish must be the official teaching language in higher education. But, some higher education institutions state that Swedish is their primary language.

Language of instruction

Foreign students have become much more commonplace in Sweden (about 10.000 98/99 as opposed to 30.000 in 2007/08). As a result more and more courses are being taught in English. The rise of courses being taught in English is also due to the fact that Sweden signed the Bologna declaration in 1999. According to a figure from 2009, that's based on the university's own information concerning teaching in English, courses taught in English make up about one fifth of all courses. However, there is some uncertainty about this figure because;

Studies have shown that: even when the teaching language is technically English, Swedish-speaking students and teachers do communicate in Swedish anyway.

Even when the teaching language is Swedish, most of the course literature is written in English.

English as a teaching language is used mostly in advanced level courses and programmes, two-thirds of the two-year Master's courses and programmes and one-year Master's courses and programmes are taught in English. Most of these can be found within the natural and technical sciences.

English is much less common at the first cycle level, with only about 10% of all courses being taught in English.

¹ Figures in this article are to a large extent based on a survey made in 2009. The survey was made by Linus Salö, and the result was published in a report titled *English or Swedish? A survey of the language situation in higher education and research*, see list of sources.

Language of dissertations

The prevalence of English is easier to ascertain by studying the number of dissertations presented in English: Almost nine out of ten dissertations defended in Sweden today are written in English. This has been the case since the mid-1990's. The highest number of dissertations written in English (94 %) can be found within the natural sciences, the corresponding number for the social sciences being 65 %, and 37 % for the humanities. Most of the dissertations defended in Sweden belong to the fields of medicine, science and engineering. Three out of ten have an abstract written in Swedish².

Pros and cons about English

Generally, people in Sweden agree on the fact that the use of English in higher education is beneficial and necessary for Sweden to be able to participate in and contribute to an international scientific co-operation. But there are also those who see the growing dominance of English as a threat, especially if it is happening at the expense of the Swedish language. Two major factors are being particularly highlighted; the potential *domain loss* and the risk of a *loss of ability*.

Domain loss refers to the situation where the native language loses its position and becomes less useable, thus less used within a particular field.

Loss of ability has to do partly with the learning ability of students which diminishes when courses are being taught in English, since many students struggle when reading academic and otherwise specialised texts in that language. It refers also to the fact that not all teachers are so good at teaching in English. Studies show that younger teachers are generally more positive towards teaching entirely in English, whereas older teachers tend to see potential problems with it, e.g. having to abandon a familiar teaching method in which, for example jokes can play a part.

Some argue that a division could be made between research, research information and education; research and education could be conducted in English, whereas research information could be given in Swedish. Many have argued against this, pointing to the fact that such a division cannot be made because the fields overlap and influence one another. Amongst other things, it has been pointed out that it is not possible to successfully inform about one's research in Swedish if proper Swedish terminology is lacking. Therefore, there are compelling democratic reasons to adopt a multi-lingual approach and strengthen the positions of both Swedish and English as main academic languages.

What to do?

As a result of many debates concerning language, some higher education institutions have developed different strategies for dealing with their choice of language, and use of language. Linus Salö's survey conducted in 2009 showed that, of the 37 higher education institutions that had been studied, 11 had

² Figures are from 2010.

some kind of official documents on language (policies, guidelines or plans). The first university to officially develop a language policy was the University of Gothenburg (Göteborgs universitet) in 2006.

The various language documents differ in their content; several institutions list Swedish as being their primary language, but at the same time, Swedish appears to become less important the more advanced the level of the course or programme is. Stockholm School of Economics (Handelshögskolan) lists English as being their primary language. The university of Karlstad (Karlstads universitet) writes glowingly about advocating and encouraging multilingualism, but does not specify exactly what this entails in terms of language choice and language use.

Many language documents also stress the importance of demonstrating a high level of English language proficiency in dissertations and other publications.

Two higher education institutions are clearly addressing terminology as an important issue in which they have high ambitions: the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala and the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm.

The Language Act – a tool that can help?

Since 2009, Sweden has a Language Act that confirms Swedish as the main language in Sweden and it is now interesting to look at what impact this Act may have on the higher education institution's language documents. The Act sends a clear signal regarding the importance of the Swedish language in our society: Swedish is to be safeguarded so that it can continue to be our main language in the future. It is an Act that states the obligations of the public administration, but it does not contain any penalty provisions. It is possible for anyone to notify the Parliamentary Ombudsman if a government agency is considered to break the Language Act. And if the Parliamentary Ombudsman finds that the Act is not correctly applied, they will forward criticism to the government agency in question. After that, it is assumed that the agency will correct the misapplication.

The Language Act cannot be used as support for a claim that all education and research in Sweden shall be conducted in Swedish. Rather, the Language Act is a *reminder* to higher education institutions of their responsibility for the Swedish language.

However, there is a section in the Act addressing terminology in the following way:

“Government agencies have a special responsibility for ensuring that Swedish terminology in their various areas of expertise is *accessible*, and that it is *used* and *developed*.”

As many as 33 of the Swedish higher education institutions, are government agencies (as mentioned above), which means that they must adhere to the signals and intentions of the Act.

TNC's perspective on the situation

As to English as instruction language the following aspects are currently our main concern at the Swedish Centre for Terminology, TNC. Being the Swedish national centre of terminology, we focus on what happens with the terminology when the instruction language is English.

We consider the Language Act as a tool that can be used to put pressure on higher education institutions when it comes to taking a terminological responsibility. We do it by questioning if the students are presented with the established Swedish terminology within the subject they are studying, if the instruction language is English and if the literature is in English. And if it is about research or new findings, and Swedish established terminology still is missing, do the students learn what to do about it? For example, do they learn that English terms can be replaced by Swedish newly coined terms – and that there are established and standardized methods for how to do this?

In our contacts with higher education institutions, we meet either of the following three beliefs:

1. The English terminology is clear and unambiguous .
2. We teach in English, so we don't have to bother about Swedish.
3. There are no Swedish terms in existence and we can't create terms in Swedish.

TNC presented a poster at a conference in 2009 in which Swedish higher education institutions took part. We called our poster "Stay on course! Avoid fishing in foreign seas!" where we responded to the three arguments with counter-arguments which we called "lifebuoys". These are our counter-arguments to the three beliefs:

1. Form joint groups for terminology and untangle the concepts behind the English terms! Then, give recommendations and suggestions on Swedish terms to be used for the concepts.
2. Create term lists in English and Swedish adapted to the courses. This should preferably not be done by one person alone, but rather by two or three teachers of special subjects.
3. Create Swedish terms by using a joint term group. Look up or store and spread terms through the Swedish National Termbank (Rikstermbanken).

A good example

I will conclude by telling about one higher education institution which has developed a language policy, has appointed staff to deal with the goals and aims of the policy –which are also addressing their terminological responsibility in a way that is in line with TNC's view:

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

The university's language policy was made official in 2010. The policy has four major points; 1.the importance of clear and concise language,2. translation, 3. terminology and 4. language aid (tools to

help with language and opportunities to gain better competence). A language coordinator was hired in the spring of 2012 and is responsible for how the policy is applied in practice. This is all happening slowly and gradually and the main focus has thus far been on the importance of clear and concise language, and how to handle translations both concerning the university's administrative and general information as well as their specific information about the different programmes.

The language coordinator tells what she has in mind when it comes to terminology:

1. "We need terminology in various aspects: The staff needs access to bi-lingual dictionaries so that the English texts that are written are accurate and terminologically consistent. This is the least complicated task, as all that is needed here are basic dictionaries without any specific terminological definitions etc. There is no doubt about what "fakultetsnämnd" means in Swedish but there is however some doubt about what its English equivalent should be.
2. We need terminology as a means of interaction. Just as any other Swedish university we need Swedish terminology in order to interact with society. As a "specialized" university we also need it within "our" specific areas of expertise (agriculture, horticulture, aquaculture, veterinary medicine etc.). We hope to find effective ways of cooperating in this matter, both with other universities and especially with various business organizations, such as a terminology group.
3. Teachers and students need to become "terminologically aware." Teachers need this in order to encourage students to work with terms, not only in English, but also in their native language. Students need this in order to understand that they need to be proficient in their specific areas of expertise in more languages than English. We have made some progress here by holding presentations for the teachers about the importance of terminological work, with practical tips on how they and the students can work with terminology. The long term goal is to be able to offer regular terminology introductions to teachers and something similar to students, perhaps as a part of the library's "course content".

It certainly helps to use paragraph 12 of the Language Act as a kind of "weapon". But, the work around terminology should not require a substantial amount of effort. Often the benefits are not apparent until later, which is why it can be difficult to see why the staff should put their time and effort into this now. It needs to be more connected to their own work so that the benefits are obviously apparent from the beginning."

Conclusion

In his investigation on the language situation in Swedish higher education Linus Salö claims:

“There is very little to be won by having a power-struggle between the languages.

English is not a threat to Swedish within higher education and research; rather, the problem lies in ill-considered strategies that do not take into account the effect that the use of another language in the learning process can have for a country’s native language and its speakers.”³

At TNC, we very much agree with this and we believe that the handling of terminology issues should play a central role in the strategies!

Anna-Lena Bucher, managing director at the Swedish Centre for Terminology, TNC.

Sources

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Salö, L. (2010). *Engelska eller svenska? En kartläggning av språksituationen inom högre utbildning och forskning*. ISBN978-91-7229-067-9.

Terminologisentrum TNC (2009). *Stay on course! Avoid fishing in foreign seas?* Poster.

³ In Swedish: Mycket lite finns att vinna på en maktkamp mellan språken. Engelskan hotar inte svenskan inom högre utbildning och forskning. Det gör bara ogenomtänkta strategier som inte tar hänsyn till de konsekvenser ett språkbyte kan innebära för ett språk och dess talare.