The Swedish Government's "Action Programme for the Swedish Language"

In October 2000, the government of Sweden decided to appoint a parliamentary committee to develop a draft action programme for the Swedish language on the assumption that "Swedish should be preserved as a complete language serving the needs of society, and that Swedish will remain an official language of the European Union." (Press release of the Swedish Ministry for Cultural Affairs 20 Oct 2000).

The work of the committee is to be based on the "Draft Action Programme for the Promotion of the Swedish Language," published by the Swedish Language Council in 1998 to describe the current status of Swedish in Sweden and in the European Union. It contains both the above statements, plus that the principle that Swedish should continue to be used as a working language in the majority of EU contexts if and when the Union is enlarged. (The programme may be found in English at http://www.spraknamnden.se/SSN/handleng.htm.)

This programme takes a stand on an issue that has generated concern in the country ever since Sweden applied for EU membership. Many fear that one or more of the major EU languages (English, German and French) will gradually gain dominance in an enlarged European Union to the detriment of languages such as Swedish, and that this could happen not only internationally but domestically as well.

Serving the needs of society

English is gaining ascendance as an EU working language. According to Björn Melander (Swedish as an EU language, Hellgren and Fallgren, 2000, in Swedish), Swedish officials at the European Commission speak English more than 80% of the time they spend in meetings. There has been some speculation in Sweden as to what would happen to Swedish if the EU made English, for example, its working language. "If political issues are increasingly dealt with at EU level and debated there in English, there is a risk that the domain of Swedish politics will be reduced, and that Swedish will thus be less useful as a language for public debate." (Draft Programme, 1998).

Thus the Swedish language would be less frequently used in the contexts that form the backbone of national public debate and the functioning of society. The abyss would continue to grow between citizens and the political elite. "And all at once people would find themselves less well-informed and simultaneously less well-equipped to express their opinions than they are today." (Westman, Svanlund 1991: The Status of the Swedish Language in European Integration, Språkvård 4/1991, in Swedish)
The dulling of the language edge

If, in Sweden, we were to consider making English the language of public affairs, we would have to "take account of the fact that for the time being, Swedes will not master the English language as well as they do Swedish. Most of us are a little duller, a little blunter about the edges, even in our best foreign language, than we are in our mother tongue." (Westman, Teleman, *Legislate the Status of the Swedish Language*, Svenska Dagbladet, 19 July 1999, in Swedish).

Although it is hardly likely that English will soon entirely predominate in any one area or in society at large, there is no question that EU membership is leaving its mark on the Swedish language. "The major challenges facing Swedish language policy and language cultivation efforts will be to ensure that it remains possible for Swedish to be used, even if it is not always used in practice; that translations conform to Swedish norms and ideals; and that Swedish is not deprived of a full range of modes of expression." (Draft Programme, 1998).

**Legalese**

The legal and administrative traditions of the EU are more continental than northern European. There is nothing strange about this, as the Nordic countries were not even part of the original European Community. Nordic tradition promotes legal formulations that are comprehensible to all. EU legal texts in Swedish translation tend to be heavier and more awkward to read than legal texts originally written in Swedish. EU translations are required to be as identical as possible in all language versions, with sentences always corresponding to one another, etc. This makes it difficult for Swedish translators to adapt their texts to how the Swedish language is actually used. Sweden has requested on various occasions that EU texts be made clearer and simpler. Sweden intends to promote this desire for a revised communications strategy during the Swedish presidency, with the assistance of the Plain Swedish Group, the language cultivation body of the Swedish Government. It is their intention to demonstrate "How EU texts could be written - without long, complex sentences or a preponderance of nouns and jargon." (Barbro Ehrenberg-Sundin, *Write in a Way Worthy of Imitation During the Presidency*. Published in Swedish in the October 2000 Bulletin of the Plain Swedish Group.) No one expects to see a complete adaptation of EU language to Swedish norms or a simplification in the way existing legislation is drafted. We will undoubtedly have to accept the fact that European Union language formulation is and will remain more complex than our own. What is important, however, is to ensure that this very un-Swedish way of using language does not spread to our national level. We must see to it that "Daily contact with EU texts does not make the people who write official documents in Swedish lose their sense of simplicity and clarity." ( *Swedish in the EU: How We Can Improve the Quality of Swedish EU texts. Report by the Government Commission on Swedish in the EU*, SOU 1990:4 Stockholm, in Swedish).

**New words and terms**

It is perfectly natural that Swedish has acquired any number of new words and concepts since the country joined the EU. The supranational nature of EU co-operation has led to new structures, working methods, names and terms all of which must have Swedish equivalents.

During the pre-accession process, some sixty thousand pages of EU texts were translated into Swedish in just a few years' time. Work done under such heavy time constraints is, of course, not always of the highest quality. It also took the first years of Swedish EU membership to build up translation staff, databases and terminology banks. In this context, it is important to recall that "The European Union, considered as a process, requires compromises on the part of Sweden, even as regards our administrative prose." (Edgren, Håkan in the Melander work cited above). Instead of lamenting the negative influence of EU jargon on Swedish, we must strive to find adequate Swedish equivalents as soon as possible whenever new words arise in negotiations or other contexts.
Officials, translators and interpreters can all contribute to this language cultivation process.

**Swedish Interpretation in the EU**

In its draft action programme, the Language Council stated that "Ambitious aims for Swedish within the EU mean that considerable resources must continue to be invested in interpreters and translators." And that "...interpretation into and from Swedish must be available at meetings of all bodies which include non-staff members, i.e. the Parliament, the Council, the Court of Justice and the Economic and Social Committee."

There is a general consensus that interpretation must be made available to and from all languages in these democratically elected bodies. Many people, however, seem prepared to consider interpreting into Swedish superfluous in working groups and expert groups at Council and Commission levels and elsewhere.

**Interpreting from Swedish only**

One example of the idea that it is more important to be able to speak one's own language than to listen to it can be found in the Swedish government commission report 1998:4, cited above. "(I)n anticipation of EU enlargement, there is every reason to reconsider the principles applying to interpreting and translation at EU institutions. The possibility of being interpreted from one's mother tongue should be given priority over the availability of interpretation into one's mother tongue."

In this context it is important to ask whether it is superfluous to assure interpretation into Swedish. Are Swedes so apt at languages that they can manage just as well, if not better, listening to the English interpretation? Or might it be the case that Swedes tend to overestimate their knowledge of foreign languages and that many understand less than they (and others) believe?

Although Kenneth Larsson, language co-ordinator for Swedish at the translation division of the European Commission, speaks out in favour of interpretation from Swedish only in the report just quoted, he also adds that "(O)f course officials get the gist (my italics) of debates and texts in these languages [English and French], but what about the nuances?"

**Who wants Swedish interpretation?**

As part of his study, Björn Melander conducted a survey that showed that 80% of the Swedish MEPs sometimes listen to interpretation in languages other than Swedish even when Swedish interpreting is available. In the ESC and the Committee of Regions, 25% of the members stated that they always listen to Swedish when it is available, while 70% stated that they sometimes listen to other language versions (primarily English). When asked why, they explain that when relay interpreting is used (when the language being spoken is not covered in the Swedish booth), it sometimes takes too long to get the Swedish version.

**Shortage of interpreters**

Questionnaire responses from Swedish officials attending various meetings at Commission and Council level indicate that they would very much like to have greater access to interpretation into Swedish. Some respondents also stated that the languages in which meeting documents were available often determined their choice of a language to listen to. If only English documents were available, they preferred to listen to the English interpretation. According to Björn Melander, "If the information gleaned from the responses is reliable, the use of other languages can often be attributed to resource problems (a shortage of interpreters and difficulties in getting Swedish documentation produced in time)."

**Future needs**
It is thus clear that there is a demand for more Swedish interpreters. As with most if not all relatively new member states, there are also run-in problems related to quality, inexperience, and terminology that give rise to certain reliability problems. This was also reflected in some responses. For these reasons, it is vital not only to train more interpreters in Swedish, but also to assure that there are stringent quality standards for Swedish interpretation.

If Swedish is to have a future as an active EU language, it is also vital that the users and potential users of interpretation services (who span the spectrum from Ministers to police officers, from miners to hairdressers) be aware that listening to and reading a foreign language, not to mention using it in making international presentations, are very different indeed from using one's mother tongue.

Another interesting question is whether the available interpreting resources are always utilised where they are most needed. Perhaps improvements can be made in this area as well.

Relevant also in this context are the misunderstandings that may arise as regards to what interpretation is and what it costs. One often-cited example in the Swedish media is the claim that interpretation and translation services "consume" 30% of the total budget of the European Union. In a debate in the largest Stockholm daily, former MP Nils Hö尔berg recently claimed that when the EU has 25 member states there will have to be 4,000 interpreters at the European Parliament alone! Such erroneous information tends to result in radical proposals of how EU language services could be made more cost effective. For example, in the same debate Swedish National Police Commissioner Sten Hecksher proposed that work in the European Union should be carried out in four languages only, and that to encourage a level playing field no one should be permitted to speak his or her own mother tongue!

Babel revisited ... interpreters of the world, unite.

For more information on Swedish language policy, please visit:

- www.spraknamnden.se
- www.justitie.regeringen.se/klarsprak/english/english.htm

---

**Recommended citation format:**