Session 3: Publications and the problem of "lesser used" languages

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"Arguments for and against the increasing use of English in the Humanities. The point of view of a Swedish historian"

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In Genesis 11, we read about how men decided to build a tower that reached to the heavens, so that they could make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth. But when the Lord saw this, he said: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.[1]

According to the Bible, the world used to have one language and a common speech, but the Lord confused the language of the whole world. The Bible depicts the loss of a common language as a punishment meted out upon mankind. No doubt, it would have been better, in many situations, if we had been in possession of a common speech. This has become increasingly obvious in today's Europe, where large amounts of money are spent on translation. But translation is not always available, for economic or practical reasons.

In this context, the situation of those who speak "lesser-used languages" is sometimes perceived as particularly difficult, because they are always the ones who must adapt and accept using a language in which they are not one hundred percent comfortable. I suppose Swedish is to be regarded as one of these lesser-used languages, even though it is spoken by 9 million people today and, consequently, is by now means a small language.

[1] Genesis 11: 'They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

There are, on average 1,000,000 speakers per language in modern society, and in societies of hunters and foragers there were, on average, only 2,000 speakers per language.[2] On this account, Swedish is a large language.

Nevertheless, compared to languages such as English, Spanish, Hindi and Arabic, Swedish and its Scandinavian siblings are of course small, and we are all (including English) dwarfed by Chinese![3] Thus, what a large language is as opposed to a small, or lesser-used, one is relative and depends on what we compare with.

What I will do in this paper is to discuss disadvantages and advantages with using the language that is, at present, the dominating lingua franca in the world, namely English, to communicate research results in the humanities. Because, much as there are disadvantages, there are advantages, too, that need to be taken into account. On the negative side, I will mainly address difficulties that have to do with the style and with the lack of standardized terminology which, in its turn, has to do with the fact that in the humanities we study culturally specific phenomena. I will also touch upon the risk that, in assessments of scholarly quality, linguistic proficiency becomes more important than disciplinary competence and skills. On the positive side, I will mainly focus on the prospects for broader, comparative perspectives and, ultimately, higher excellence in scholarship.

But before embarking on these two themes and the balance between them, I want to dwell on the issue of who our audience is. For whom are we, as scholars, writing? Do we think of our audience as well-educated people in general, or as our fellow scholars? Do we think of our audience as nationally confined, or as a somewhat broader group? In order to make the alternatives more concrete, I describe them in the following table from my own point of view as a historian.

[2] Tore Jansson
[3] Jan Svartvik, p. 3: Chinese 1071 millions, English 427, Spanish 266, Hindi 182, Arabic 181.

All Swedish (and Scandinavian) historians	All historians in the world
All Swedes (and Scandinavians) with an interest in history ("the national public")	All people in the world with an interest in history ("the global public")

→ reasonable to use SWEDISH

→ reasonable to use other language, probably ENGLISH

There has been, and still is, a strong tradition of writing history in the national language, regardless of whether the addressee is the national scholarly community or the interested public of that nation. This is true for Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries, and I am sure this is true for other European countries as well. Partly, this choice has to do with the role allotted to history and historians in the nineteenth century and within the framework of nationalism and building of national identities. Historians were expected to tell the people about its glorious past, and to do this they had to use a language the people could understand, just like the clergy who were told to use the vernacular when addressing their congregations after the Reformation. Partly, the choice of the national language has to do with the fact that when we tell the history of, for instance, Sweden we may want to talk about things that perhaps did not exist anywhere else but in Sweden (such as intricate details within the tax system or property rights system) and for which there will, as a consequence, be no good translations. Indeed, we may need to talk about these things, in order to attain the degree of precision that we require of a scholarly text.

As we have seen, then, there are several perfectly understandable reasons for why historians in many countries use the national language, their maternal language, as their preferred means of communication. This choice seems to allow them to use the same text to address both their colleagues and the interested public. This may, however, be something of an illusion. In fact, historians are often criticized (at least in my home country) for writing in a way that is unintelligible to the interested public. This allegation does have some ground. Since the 1970s, Swedish historians have increasingly incorporated into their writings an arsenal of theoretical concepts, borrowed from

neighboring disciplines (first from the social sciences, now also from literary studies, linguistics, etc). Engaging this kind of discourse tends to make texts less readable to the public, even though the texts are, still, written in Swedish. Therefore, I find it less convincing when I encounter the argument that we have to write in Swedish in order to reach out with our results to the interested public. Reaching out to the interested public is important, not least because it is the public that feeds us through the taxes, but this is not a simple question of whether we use Swedish or not; it goes much deeper than that and involves thinking more carefully about how effectively we communicate in our maternal language, the use of theory, of metaphors, etc.

A preliminary conclusion could be that we have to conceptualize our task as twofold: to communicate our result to two different audiences – the national public and the global scholarly community – and that this should be done in two clearly distinctive ways:

All Swedish (and Scandinavian) historians	**All historians in the world** **→ reasonable to use English and a rhetorical style appropriate for that audience**
All Swedes (and Scandinavians) with an interest in history ("the national public") **→ reasonable to use SWEDISH and a rhetorical style appropriate for that audience**	All people in the world with an interest in history ("the global public")

So far so good. But do any disadvantages ensue from the choice of English when a Swedish historian tries to convey her results to the global scholarly community?

The first disadvantage is obvious. It is considerably more difficult to express oneself with a sufficient degree of precision in a language that is not your own. This is not something to take casually. Precision and lucidity are, in my opinion, the qualities that are most important in a text with scholarly ambitions. Only if your results are presented clearly and your standpoints are lucid will it be possible for others to understand them and to criticize them in a way that allows us, as a community of scholars, to move forward towards better knowledge of the world. Thus, if the use of languages other than one's first language – and this usually means English – results in muddled and confused texts, we have gained nothing and lost a lot.

The difficulty of using English in a scholarly context is compounded by two factors: the, let us say, rhetorical style that is expected in many Humanities, and the lack of standardized and commonly agreed-upon terminology in disciplines such as, for instance, history.

In the humanities, we do not simply transmit our results through our texts, as is the case, I believe, in science. In other words, it is seldom enough just to account for a series of data (in the form of tables or diagrams, or in the form of excerpts and quotations). The data have to be framed and put into context, so that they become intelligible and meaningful. Framing of data is often seen as one of the most important qualities in a historian. It is through the framing, or interpretation, as some would prefer to call it, that the scholar shows that she understands her results and what they say about the past. Framing, or contextualization of data, raises the stakes for the writer. If the text is not merely a channel through which we transmit data but the message, the writer has to be able to mould the text in its entirety and put his/her personal stamp on it. This is what I mean when I say that our texts have to meet rhetorical or semi-literary standards.[4] Writing texts of this sort in a foreign language is a very demanding task.

The other complicating factor is the lack of standardized terminology, at least in history. I do not mean to say that there is absolutely no common terminology at all, but that it is in

[4] Cf. Lavelle

many fields more incomplete and uncertain than in science. This difference, which has fundamental implications, has to do with what our objects of study are.

In science, the object of study is often not confined to a certain culture or society, but is more universal. The object of study may be a certain type of mathematical problem, or the function and dysfunction of a certain organ in the human body, or a chemical process. These problems will not vary across cultures, and scientists in different parts of the world will be able to work on solving the same problem. Therefore, they can talk to each other about the problem using the same concepts, which will probably be English or Latin concepts. (By the way, the fact that scientists across the world can work on the same problem is what accounts for the rush that we sometimes notice in their field: there is a risk that someone else will solve your problem before you manage to do it).

In the humanities, the object of study is often culturally confined. We study historical processes, or works of art, or religious movements, what have you, as they manifest themselves in particular places. Even though there will be similarities if we compare different places, it is nevertheless the case that we have to understand each place, each culture or society, on its own premises – otherwise we would fail to contextualize our results. To take just one example, when I have studied the use of wills in eighteenth-century Sweden and my colleague in London has studied the use of wills in eighteenth-century England, we have of course had good reason to compare our results and we have learnt a lot from each other. But we have not studied the same problem. When my friend published her results before I did mine, it did not in any way undermine the market for me because knowing something about how wills were used in England, as we now do because of her work, did not make my work superfluous because the situation may have been totally different in Sweden (as indeed it turned out to be, partly because the legal systems were very different). Thus, while many scientists work on solving the same problem, this is, I surmise, rarely the case in the humanities, where scholars instead work on problems that are parallel but not identical.

This short digression on differences between the sciences and the humanities will hopefully help me identify the causes for why there is less standardized terminology in for instance history than in chemistry. The need to develop a common terminology has been less acute in history because of the culturally confined character of our subjects. To the extent that historians have accepted the responsibility for writing the history of the nation, they have found it natural to pay most attention to what went on within their territory in the past. This is not to deny that within certain fields, historians have broken out of their national confinement. If you write about the Catholic Church in the middle ages, you write about an international organization with an international terminology of its own. Likewise, the study of trade relations and the recent enthusiasm for global history has been conducive to broader views and to greater consensus about terminology. But writings about other but equally important parts of the past (such as legal systems, fiscal systems, agrarian structures) are characterized by greater terminological problems.

It would be highly beneficial, I think, if historians could work together more, both to compare and accumulate evidence (in order to arrive at results that have a broader relevance) and to chisel out a terminology that captures the things we have a common interest in talking about. As it is now, much time and energy is lost on thinking about how various phenomena (that may not exist any longer) should be translated to English. Sometimes, we pick a word we think is the right one, giving our British conversation partner a completely false impression. Once again, this reduces lucidity but in a less obvious and therefore more malign way.

A second disadvantage connected with the increasing use of English in the humanities, or, more correctly, the increasing demand for use of English in the humanities, has to do with assessment of research performance (for instance, via bibliometrics). It would be a serious fallacy to believe that the historian who publishes in English is by definition also a better historian than the one who writes in Swedish or Bulgarian or Burmese. Mastering English is one skill, doing excellent historical research is another skill. It is desirable that these two things go hand in hand, but it is not necessarily always the case. It is perfectly conceivable that someone who writes English well gets her papers accepted for

publication in English-language, high-status journals, whereas someone who writes less well or who does not have access to linguistic advice is turned down, because the importance of the results is not convincingly shown. I think equating English-language publications with scholarly excellence is a fallacy particularly in the humanities and perhaps less so in the sciences, because of what I said previously. If the article is a channel though which data are transmitted, the quality of those data will loom larger than the linguistic quality of the text as such. If, in contrast, the article is expected not only to transmit data but to frame them in a persuasive manner, the quality of the text as a whole, and the elegance with which the arguments are presented, will be of utmost significance. If assessment of research performance does not take this into consideration, there is a risk that demand for use of English can demote researchers who are better at their discipline but less successful in their use of English.

As we have seen, there are some obvious disadvantages, or risks, connected with the increasing demand for use of English in the humanities. The demand does not always pay due attention to the fact that it is very difficult to write the sort of English that is required on the highest academic level, not does it pay attention to the specific problems that follow from the fact that terminology is less standardized in some disciplines within the humanities. Finally, there is a risk that we confuse quality in research – which is what we should be interested in – with quality in language.

Having said this, I would nevertheless argue that there is a tendency to overemphasize the importance of these disadvantages and risks. It is not convincing to just point at the risks and then conclude that we will not embark on this journey into a hostile country. Risks and disadvantages have to be balanced against possible gains. If the gains are large enough, they warrant the journey, even though there will be problems along the road.

I conceive of historical scholarship not narrating the history of the Swedish nation. I think of my task as identifying interesting and important questions with respect to societies in the past, as devising methods that make it possible to answer the questions in a convincing manner, and as framing the results, that is to say, both to place them in a

historical context where they become meaningful and to relate and compare them to results reached by other scholars. If we think of our job in this way, two conclusions must be drawn. First, we have to accept and like the fact that we have to communicate our results to two different audiences and for most of us this means communicating in two different arenas and languages. If we do not accept this, we will compromise quality in the sense that we will fail to spot crucial differences and similarities in historical trajectories. We have to be open-minded and curious in order to fulfil our jobs as intellectuals, and we can only do this if we communicate across borders. Second, we have to take the problems I have pointed at seriously and solve them in a professional way. Disciplines have to take responsibility for developing adequate international terminology, and universities have to take responsibility for giving its scholars the linguistic training that is necessary.