

# **Sweden**

A Country in Linguistic Turmoil

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Until fairly recently, Sweden had been considered to be a homogenous nation, but in the past hundred years or so it has become quite the opposite. In this paper, I would mostly like to address the complication that has arisen due to the influx of immigration that began soon after the end of the Second World War. Around this time Sweden was suffering from a shortage of labor, and immigration was becoming a necessity. Before this time, Sweden had very few immigrants and was in fact, a mostly homogenous nation. Sweden was able to offer high wages and superior living standards so it is no surprise refugees flocked to Sweden.

I would like to linguistically analyze Sweden in terms of status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning as defined by Myers-Scotton (2006). These definitions can be found in the attached appendix.

Status planning

In Sweden, Swedish is *de facto* the ‘official language’ much like English is in the United States. Sweden also has five official minority languages, which are Sami, Meänkieli, Finnish, Yiddish, and Romani. Below is a chart indicating the number of speakers of each official linguistic minority group according to Winsa (1999).

Major groups of refugees admitted to Sweden, 1943–1980. Approximate figures	
30 000 Baltic nationals	during and after WW2
25 000 refugees from Eastern Europe	average of 1 000 refugees selected annually 1950–1973
8 000 Hungarians	the Hungarian revolt of 1956
3 000 Czechs	Prague 1968
4 000 Poles	disturbances/persecution of Jews from the late 1960s onwards
800 American deserters	in connection with the war in Vietnam
10 000 Greeks	during the period of Junta rule, 1967–1974
1 000 Ugandans	during the persecutions in Uganda in the 1970s
12 000 Assyrians and Syrians	emigrants from Turkey, Lebanon/Syria and Iraq, starting in 1967
11 000 Latin Americans	from Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay etc.
2 000 “boat people”	refugees from Vietnam, mostly of Chinese descent

Sweden (1989).

Official Minority Language	Number of Speakers
Sami	5-10,000
Meänkieli & Finnish	40-70,000 in Norrbotten by Tornedalians 200-250,000 throughout Sweden by Swedish Finns
Yiddish	A few thousand
Romani	5-15,000

The Sami are the only indigenous group of the above five and they have inhabited the northernmost regions of Scandinavia for at least two millennia. Most of the Sami are reindeer herders. On the Oakes (2001) map located on the attached handout, all of the lettered areas are inhabited by the Sami People and the dark shaded area is where Meänkieli is spoken.

“*Meänkieli*” means “our language” in Finnish and it was formerly known as Tornedalen Finnish (“*Tornedalsfinska*”). The line that passes through the dark area is the Torne River, which is in Torne Valley. Winsa groups Meänkieli and Finnish are closely related. Yiddish is spoken by a few thousand Jews in Sweden and Romani is spoken by the Roma people (gypsies.) There are a number of unofficial and immigrant languages, but they are not supported by the government like the official minority languages are. Aside from these official languages, other languages like English are used in certain official domains. See section 1.1 on the handout for more details.

In Sweden, mass media is very organized and can be helpful to both natives and non-natives. The main television station in Sweden is called *Sveriges Television* (SVT) and it is government-run. The main radio station is called *Sveriges Radio* (SR) and it is independent and publicly funded through a licensing fee determined by the Swedish Parliament. There is no advertising and they offer many different channels and programs. Both also have very comprehensive websites. ([www.svt.se](http://www.svt.se) : *Sveriges Television* & [www.sr.se](http://www.sr.se) : *Sveriges Radio*.)

Before the 1980s people involved in mass media broadcast were required to speak in *rikssvenska*, which is “National Swedish.” Now there are broadcasts in other non-standard dialects and also in Sami, Finnish, and Meänkieli. For more information, look to section 1.2 on the handout.

### Corpus planning

The bulk of the work with regards to corpus planning is done by a number of Swedish government agencies. I have compiled a list of examples in section 1.3 of the handout. *Svenska Akademi* was founded in 1786 and they were the first agency to work solely for the promotion of Swedish. They publish the *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok* (SAOB), which is like the Oxford Dictionary and the *Svenska Akademiens Ordlista* (SAOL), which is a list of Swedish words that is compiled and updated based on common usage. *Svenska Akademi* also publishes grammar as well as dissertations and tips for the development of good style and manners. Otherwise, corpus planning occurs on the underground level where speakers speak and create new words and shape their languages to fit their identities.

The newly diverse Sweden has become a place with a number of emerging contemporary authors who are reshaping the Swedish language. They often write about rebellion against becoming “Swed-ified” and emphasize the ability to speak perfect Swedish, but choosing to speak in forms of broken Swedish to establish their identity and show individuality. One such

author is Jonas Hassen Khemiri, who's first book is entitled *Ett Öga Rött* (One Eye Red). Now, let us analyze the first sentence of *Ett Öga Rött*:

“*I dag det var sista sommarlovsdagen och därför jag hjälpte pappa i affären.*”

This sentence means, “*Today was the last day of summer vacation and that's why I helped my dad at the store.*” Grammatically speaking, there are two things preventing this sentence from being in correct Swedish. The sentence should read: “*I dag **var det** sista sommarlovsdagen och därför **hjälpte jag** pappa i affären*” because a fronted adverbial phrase of time inverts the subject and the verb in Swedish. This sentence structure appears throughout the whole book except for in cases where the main character, Halim *decides* to speak in correct Swedish. The fact that Halim chooses to speak his own form of Swedish shows how language and identity are inherently linked.

It turns out that there are areas in Sweden where these forms of Swedish exist like a dialect would, and it is important to understand that they abide by rules like any other language. Still, linguists refuse to call these forms dialects probably because these forms are fusions of the Swedish language with an immigrant language. Three well known cases are: ‘*Rinkebysvenska*’ in a suburb in Stockholm, ‘*Rosengårdsskånska*’ in Malmö, and ‘*Gårdstena*’ in Gothenburg. (Lazarova, 2005). These are just a few varieties that exist and linguists currently place these forms of language under the umbrella term “Swedish on Multicultural Grounds.”

Another interesting change that is currently happening in the corpus of Swedish has to do with phonetics. The charts in section 4.1 of the handout shows modern Swedish pronunciations, but according to Lazarova (2005), I have learned that the increased usage of SMS texting has brought about a resurgence of pronouncing words very archaically again, mostly in the youth population. Archaic pronunciation still exists in Swedish religious songs and texts.

### Acquisition planning

In terms of acquisition planning, Sweden does a lot for its people. According to *Statens Invandrarverk*, the government has provided free Swedish lessons for immigrants since the 1960s and this is still in effect today. There are also many news services that cater to immigrants. *Sveriges Radio* devotes a part of its website to deliver the news in “*lätt svenska*.” (easy Swedish). They call this section of the website *Klartext*. On their website, it reads --- in

English, “*Klartext* brings you news from Sweden and other countries. *Klartext* tells the news at a slower pace, with words that are easier to understand. Almost 300 000 people listen to *Klartext*, to find out what happens in Sweden and the rest of the world.” This service is very useful for immigrants and other Swedish language learners because it allows the user to read the text and also listen to it online. There is also another similar news service called *8 sidor*. *Åtta Sidor* is a free independent non-profit organization that is subsidized by the state. 14,000 issues of *Åtta Sidor* are sent out each week to 100,000 subscribers. Aside from news, radio, and television, Sweden also promises mother tongue instruction.

According to Winsa (1999):

since 1977, all pupils with a foreign home language have had the right to request mother tongue instruction in primary school and *gymnasium*<sup>1</sup> according to need... The total instructional time in the home language should not exceed seven years within the public school system... The rule does not apply for Tornedalian, Sami, or Roma pupils... Finnish has a special position in the regulations for *gymnasium* where it can be the language of instruction in a whole programme.

For more information on mother tongue instruction, see Winsa’s article: “*Language Planning in Sweden*” which is printed in the 1999 edition of the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.

Simply put, the Swedish language is not what it used to be. Languages evolve, and live and die, but with over nine million speakers, Swedish is not currently threatened with death. Some may fear that immigration and the varieties of “Swedish on Multicultural Grounds” that have appeared will destroy Swedish, but change does not equal death.

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<sup>1</sup> High school.

## Works Cited

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## Appendix

Myers-Scotton (2006)

### 12.2.1 Three areas of language planning

Today, language planning is largely considered under three sub-categories: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning.

- **Status planning** largely refers to identifying a language to be the official language; but, as Cooper (1989: 32) notes, the term has been extended to refer to how languages are allocated to a variety of functions, such as medium of instruction and medium of mass communication (e.g. radio and TV).
- **Corpus planning** is a matter of working out what the official language will look like, in terms of its alphabet, its words, and other matters of standardization. Plans to reform spelling and adopt or coin new words fall into this category.
- **Acquisition planning**. This is really an extension of status planning. Most prominently, this type of planning involves ensuring that there are ways – education – for people to acquire whatever languages the planners want them to acquire. Presumably, this includes at least the official language. Thus, plans for language teaching are examples of acquisition planning.