

THE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF FOREIGNERS IN SWEDISH:  
LISTENER ATTITUDE AND CONTEXTUAL APPROPRIACY

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I. Introduction

This paper is intended quite simply to report the results of two investigations, which were made in order to try to discover the role of two non-linguistic factors in a speech act situation involving foreign speakers.<sup>1</sup> These factors are situational - the contextual appropriacy of the foreigner's utterance; and attitudinal - the native listener's bias regarding foreign speakers. As will shortly become apparent, both these areas of investigation are particularly resistant to empirical research.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to isolate such factors, which results in many uncontrolled variables being involved; and this, combined with the limited scope of the investigations necessitated by the practical difficulties of such testing; are clear restrictions on the generality of the results. It is worth asking whether such restricted results justify the time and effort involved; but nevertheless they are clearly of interest, as is discussion of the method of investigation.

The background theory is that deviation on the part of the speaker on any level of the speech act will affect the interpretation process adversely; and where the listener's threshold for repairing deviantly formulated speech acts is crossed, could cause the speech act to fail as communication. The reason for this is that the speaker's non-native pronunciation is already taxing the listener's ability to repair the speech signal, which he does in order to be able to interpret the utterance. Additional deviance in, for instance, the contextual appropriacy of the utterance, could well mean that the listener's ability to repair the utterance is overtaxed. Similarly any unwillingness or inability on the part of the listener to make the necessary effort could also result in the failure of the speech act.

## II. Listener attitude

The aim of this investigation was to establish a means of testing the hypothesis that the native speaker is less willing to interpret the utterance of a foreigner than that of a native, due to preconceived notions about foreigners; 3 (i) & (ii) and further, that these attitudes vary according to the type of foreigner they have to deal with. Consequently, an experiment was set up to discover native Swedish attitudes to different accents in Swedish, both foreign and dialectal.

A major problem with such investigations is that the different personal voice qualities and degree of non-native pronunciation of the speakers play an uncontrolled role. Therefore, a matched guise technique<sup>4</sup> using a talented native speaker<sup>5</sup> imitating the various dialects and foreign accents. The immense good fortune of a person who can successfully imitate accents being available thus overcomes the problem of holding personal factors constant. Although this means that native speaker reactions to native speaker impressions of what accents are like will be elicited, such reactions tend to be very stereotyped,<sup>6</sup> and will probably reflect attitudes to the groups who speak with those accents.

### II.1. Material, informant and recording

The material consisted of a short text with what was neutral subject matter at that time:

Kan vi få energi från solen? Ja, på ett miljövänligt men dyrt sätt genom solceller, som kan förvandla solljus till vanlig elektricitet.<sup>7</sup>

The informant was a Swedish male from Scania, Southern Sweden; an academic about 30 years old; endowed with an ability to mimic with stunning accuracy. He imitated Stockholm, Gothenburg and Northern Swedish dialects; was also recorded in his native, Southern dialect; and imitated American English, Finnish and French foreign accents in Swedish. The texts were recorded as many times as were necessary, until the speaker and those listening were satisfied; in the echo-free studio at the Department of Phonetics, University of Lund.

## II.2. Test tapes, subjects and procedure

The subjects<sup>5</sup> were predominantly 18 year old South Swedish girls at a local school, who intended to train for health care jobs. The question form they filled in after completing this and other tests showed them to be homogenous groups of about 15 each, largely middle-class, all of whom had studied English for about 8 years, three quarters German for 4 years and one third French for 3 years. About half had foreign friends, of these 14 had English friends, with whom they often spoke English, while 7 had Finnish friends, with whom they always spoke Swedish.

The test tapes were put together in such a way that all four listener groups heard all the Swedish dialects, and half heard the foreign accents. (The other half listened to real foreign accents.) All groups heard Southern Swedish first, for practice, as a buffer, and for intergroup comparison. Instructions had been recorded by a female South Swedish speaker;<sup>5</sup> and these were included on the tape, as well as being written out on the stencilled answer sheet, as was the text. The test tapes were played at the front of the classroom on a Tandberg tape recorder. No subject sat more than 3 metres away from the tape recorder, and no difference could be noticed according to where they sat, nor between the four groups.

The listeners then used the stencilled answer sheet to judge each of the speakers they heard with regard to the following six aspects,<sup>8</sup> making their judgements in terms of one of five categories for each aspect. It is difficult to evaluate how successful the questions were in eliciting judgements about the areas to be investigated; however, few subjects showed any confusion about or unwillingness to complete the task set for them. Those who did object did so in the space provided on the question form - they felt one shouldn't have prejudices based on how people speak. The six aspects were:

1. Which job the speaker is most likely to have.
2. How successful the speaker is likely to be in life.
3. How well the speaker would do in a fight.
4. How dependable the speaker is.
5. How attractive - desirable as a friend - the speaker is.
6. How intelligent the speaker is.

### II.3. Results of listener attitude investigation

There are many things which should be kept in mind when considering the results, the most important are perhaps: it is more probable that a Finn would be expected to be a factory worker, and that an American would be expected to be an academic in Sweden, due to factual rather than attitudinal factors. Secondly, one major difference in the experience Swedes have of the different foreign nationalities both as groups and as individuals, is how many immigrants of each nationality there are in Sweden, whereabouts they live in Sweden, how likely Swedes are to come into contact with them, and what sort of contact.

On 31st December, 1975 - about the time the investigation was carried out - there were approximately 400,000 unnaturalized foreigners living in Sweden, the largest group were Finns - 184,000 - and 6500 were from the U.S.A. (there were also 7000 from the U.K.), and no figures are given for the French.<sup>9</sup> Further questions one could ask are about what sort of reactions were evoked, whether there were for instance, stereotyped reactions to social groups mixed with more purely linguistic reactions to the pleasingness of certain foreign accents. Also, the limited scope of the investigation should be kept in mind; and ordinal categories are not the best way to quantify a test of this nature.

#### II.3.1. Analysis of results

For each test and group, the number of responses in each of the five possible response categories was counted, then this was reckoned as a percentage of the total number of subject responses (i.e. in all categories) for that question. The results of the investigation, in percentage of subject responses, are given in table 2. They are presented under the five graduated ordinal category response possibilities - where 5 indicates the best category - for the six judgement aspects. The median category value is underlined.

As these rows of figures are difficult to absorb, and the median category is too imprecise; I have used the interpolation of a median in the percentage figures, to rank the different dialects and accents, according to which was evaluated most highly. Strictly speaking this is an illicit procedure with ordinal categories. However, the interpolated median is only used to provide an overview by facilitating inter-speaker comparison; and the percentage results can be referred to for exact figures.

1.JOB	2.SUCCESS	3.FIGHTING	4.DEPENDABLE	5.ATTRACTIVE	6.INTELLIGENT
1.Göteborg	1.Göteborg	1.Stockholm	1.Stockholm	1.Stockholm	1.Stockholm
2.Sth Sweden	2.Stockholm	2.Nth Sweden	Göteborg	2.Sth Sweden	Göteborg
3.Stockholm	3.Sth Sweden	Finnish	3.Sth Sweden	Nth Sweden	3.Sth Sweden
4.Nth Sweden	4.Nth Sweden	4.American	4.Nth Sweden	4.Göteborg	4.Nth Sweden
5.American	5.American	5.Sth Sweden	American	5.American	5.American
6.French	French	6.French	6.Finnish	6.French	French
7.Finnish	7.Finnish	7.Göteborg	7.French	7.Finnish	7.Finnish

Table 1. Ranking of 'matched guise' foreign accent and dialect imitations.

### II.3.2. The attitudes of some South Swedish listeners to other accents

As can be seen very easily in table 1, there is clear patterning of preference for Swedish speakers as opposed to foreigners; for big city as opposed to country (including the local) dialects; and for American as opposed to Finnish foreigners. It is quite amazing to be able to elicit the prejudices often attributed to Swedish listeners in this way; despite the many shortcomings in the formulation of the investigation. It is to be remembered that it is the same speaker who is being judged differently according to how he speaks. In all aspects except fighting ability, Swedish dialects are evaluated more highly than foreigners - they are thought to have better jobs, be more likely to succeed, be more dependable, more attractive and more intelligent than foreigners.

When we compare the attitudes displayed to the different foreign accents, in most cases an American accent is valued most highly, a Finnish accent least highly, and a French accent somewhere between. This is again with the exception of fighting ability. In addition it can be noted that a Finnish accent is considered more dependable than a French, and that an American accent is thought as dependable as a North Swedish dialect, considered least dependable of Swedish dialects by these Southern Swedish listeners. Further with regard to dialects, it is surprising that these listener should prefer city dialects to the local dialect, even with regard to dependability; but perhaps not so surprising that they are least appreciative of the most distant dialect.<sup>10</sup> When it came to fighting abil-

ity however, although the results were very close in this area, the Stockholm dialect ranks highest, North Swedish and Finnish - usually considered to be best at fighting - come equal second, American ranks before South Swedish, and French before Gothenburg.

### III. Contextual Appropriacy

The aim of this investigation is to try ways of testing the hypothesis that the native listener is less able to repair a contextually deviantly formulated utterance, when the speaker is a foreigner.<sup>1</sup> The contextual appropriacy of an utterance is regarded as having to do with the native application and manifestation of the rules for using the language: what is said to whom, how it is said, and under what circumstances.<sup>3(iv)</sup>

Two aspects in this area which are particularly problematical for foreigners are those of culturally based presupposition, and of focus. Presupposition is taken to be the knowledge which the speaker assumes in his utterance to be shared with the listener, and focus is taken to be the information in the utterance. It is difficult to systematically vary the degree of contextual appropriacy: as native norms are not known, deviance from them cannot be measured. Furthermore, contextual appropriacy is rarely if ever the only non-standard factor in the foreigner's utterance - rather, he deviates on all levels of the speech act. The scope of this investigation will therefore be limited to finding out about the native Swedish listener's ability to repair the same contextually inappropriate utterances from different native and non-native speakers.

#### III.1. Material, informants and recording

The material consists of four sentences, each with a context, the latter, like the instructions, were on the test tapes and on the stencilled answer sheet:

(a) Pretend you are standing in a queue at the post office. The person in front of you says the following to the assistant:

"Det finns inga telegramblanketter." (There are no telegram forms.)

This sentence presupposes that telegrammes are sent from post offices, which is not the case in Sweden.

(b) Pretend you are waiting for your turn in a cheese shop. The person before you says the following to the assistant:

‘Jag vill köpa trehundra gram lagrad Havarti.’ (I want to buy three hundred grammes of matured Havarti = a Danish cheese.)

In Sweden one asks for hektos, not hundreds of grammes, so the focus was incorrectly formulated.

(c) Pretend you are standing in a queue at the telegraph section at the telecommunications building (televerket). The person in front of you says the following to the clerk:

‘Det finns inga telegramblanketter.’ (same as for (a))

The presupposition is now correct, as telegrams are sent from the televerket in Sweden.

(d) The same context as for (b)

‘Jag vill köpa tre hekto lagrad Havarti.’

The focus is now correctly formulated.

The informants were all women, 20-30 years old, with university level education.

1. Native Swede, with General Swedish dialect.
2. Finnish accent in Swedish, from Finland, 6 years in Sweden.
3. Australian accent in Swedish, from Australia, 3 1/2 years in Sweden.
4. English accent in Swedish, from Surrey, England (Southern Standard), 5 years in Sweden.

The recordings, including the instructions, were all made in the same way as for the attitude investigation.

### III.2. Test tapes, subjects and procedure

The test tapes were made up according to the following pattern, all listener groups heard a buffer sentence first for practice, and instructions.

listener group	sentence (a) - presupp'n	sentence (b) - focus	sentence (c) + presupp'n	sentence (d) + focus
1	Swedish	Australian	English	Finnish
2	Australian	Finnish	Swedish	English
3	Finnish	English	Australian	Swedish
4	English	Swedish	Finnish	Australian

Each sentence was followed by a 50 second pause followed by the word "stop" in which the two following questions were to be answered:

(i) How do you think the shop assistant will reply?

(ii) How do you think the assistant experiences the situation?

Five words were given, one of which was to be underlined in answer to (ii):

difficult/strange/normal/humorous/fun      (jobbig/konstig/normal/skojig/  
festlig)

The subjects and procedure were the same as for the previous investigation.

### III.3. Results of contextual appropriacy investigation

The results for the Swedish speaker are regarded as the norm for how easily the utterance can be understood, and what attitude it is thought would normally be held toward a speaker in the context described. The results for sentences with "correct" presupposition and focus (c and d) indicate how easily the speaker would be understood under favourable conditions, worse results for sentences with "incorrect" presupposition and focus (a and b) would constitute some evidence for contextual inappropriacy affecting the interpretation process adversely. If this happens more with the foreigners than with the native, we have some evidence concerning foreign speakers' utterances being more difficult to repair. The personal difference between the speakers cannot be taken into account.

#### III.3.1. Analysis of results

No subjects in the listener groups were excluded from the results. This was partly to preserve the random nature of the cross-section, but primarily because it is difficult to motivate exclusion of e.g. those who stated they had slightly impaired hearing, when they performed as well if

not better than the average on a word identification test with the same informants. From the reply the subject thought the assistant would have given, it was determined whether the utterance had been understood. The number of responses in each of the four categories, since no subject underlined 'fun', was calculated as a percentage of the total subject responses for that sentence, separately for understood, and not understood. See Table 3.

### III.3.2. How contextual appropriacy affects intelligibility

All subjects understood the utterances involving faulty presupposition when the speaker was Swedish - thus faulty presupposition should not affect intelligibility. A similar if slightly worse result was obtained for the foreign speakers - they were all understood by about 90 % of the subjects, whether the presupposition was correct or not. However, one third of the subjects realized and commented the presupposition was incorrect when the speaker was Swedish, while only one tenth indicated this when the speaker was foreign.

Faulty formulation of focus did not affect the intelligibility of the native speaker either - about 95 % understood the utterance regardless of whether the focus was correct or not. The results for the foreigners differ markedly from this - by 25-50 %. Three quarters of the subjects understood the correctly formulated utterance for the Finnish speaker, while only half understood the incorrect one. For the English speaker almost all understood the correct one, but only three quarters the incorrect one. For the Australian, three quarters understood the correct utterance, and only one quarter understood the incorrectly formulated one. That the results were so poor for the Australian could be due to the utterance having been judged by group one, which did not perform as well on the buffer as did the other groups. One listener for the English speaker commented the faulty construction: 'You mean three hectos'.

There was very little difference in attitude to the different speakers, as judged by the subjects in this test. It can be assumed that such a test as this is not an effective way of finding out what attitudes native speakers have, as they realize that this is a question of prejudice, which they choose to conceal. In any case, about three quarters of the responses were for experiencing the situation as normal, the remaining responses scattered evenly over the other three categories for all speakers.

The results clearly confirm that a native listener is less able to repair a deviantly formulated speech act when the speaker is a foreigner. This is consistent with the results of informal fieldwork carried out over about a year, to see how these constructed speech acts function in face to face interaction. About twenty assorted native speakers and foreigners in all, were accompanied to post offices, cheese shops and the telecommunications building. Reactions depended a great deal on how busy the office or shop was, and on the personalities involved. Native speaker's utterances were usually understood, while foreigners' often were not. Further, there were clear attitudinal differences towards different nationalities and sexes; displayed in, for instance, how patient the assistant was.

#### IV. Conclusion

The results of these two investigations support the hypothesis that a native speaker is less willing and less able to interpret utterances when the speaker is a foreigner; which is a contributing factor to the failure of speech acts involving foreigners, though all the cautionary words about limited scope and uncontrollable variables should be borne in mind. Some of the many interesting aspects in this problem area which would be worth pursuing further are: how the foreigners' or dialect speakers' systematically deviant speech can function as a social handicap, like any 'restricted' code.<sup>3(iii)</sup> Or the role the mass media have played in altering attitudes to various nationalities - e.g. the post-war attitude to Americans. The unquestioning willingness of the subjects to perform the tests. Whether one can elicit attitudes to a variety of a language without involving the attitudes held towards those who speak that variety.<sup>11</sup> Devising means of researching the role played by non-linguistic factors in the speech act is indisputably difficult, but will undoubtedly ultimately prove to be worth while.

area:	1. JOB					2. SUCCESS					3. FIGHTING				
category:	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
South Swedish	10	<u>52</u>	13	13	12	6	<u>49</u>	42	0	3	5	<u>20</u>	<u>43</u>	25	7
Stockholm	14	<u>45</u>	25	16	0	14	<u>48</u>	32	6	0	2	<u>36</u>	<u>42</u>	15	5
Gothenburg	31	<u>34</u>	11	17	7	18	<u>49</u>	23	6	4	1	15	<u>34</u>	35	15
North Swedish	3	<u>25</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>32</u>	15	7	<u>44</u>	42	5	2	4	<u>22</u>	<u>52</u>	20	2
American	2	18	<u>19</u>	<u>26</u>	35	8	<u>23</u>	<u>54</u>	15	0	5	24	<u>43</u>	21	7
French	20	13	8	<u>13</u>	46	7	29	<u>46</u>	15	3	5	16	<u>33</u>	39	7
Finnish	0	14	17	<u>21</u>	48	0	13	<u>72</u>	9	6	0	32	<u>43</u>	18	7

  

area:	4. DEFENDABLE					5. ATTRACTIVE					6. INTELLIGENT				
category:	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
South Swedish	12	23	<u>48</u>	17	0	3	7	<u>54</u>	16	20	11	37	<u>42</u>	10	0
Stockholm	10	32	<u>44</u>	11	3	0	25	<u>52</u>	13	10	8	<u>55</u>	<u>29</u>	6	2
Gothenburg	9	34	<u>36</u>	17	4	0	11	<u>49</u>	29	11	17	<u>45</u>	32	3	3
North Swedish	10	22	<u>47</u>	18	3	1	26	<u>32</u>	29	12	6	<u>29</u>	<u>50</u>	15	0
American	8	16	<u>58</u>	9	9	2	8	<u>43</u>	32	15	8	9	<u>57</u>	23	3
French	2	14	<u>36</u>	28	20	0	10	<u>39</u>	20	31	14	17	<u>32</u>	34	3
Finnish	5	11	<u>49</u>	20	15	0	2	36	<u>34</u>	28	0	13	<u>52</u>	32	3

Table 2. Results of Listener Attitude Investigation in percentage of subject responses. Five ordinal category response possibilities (5 = "highest") in six judgement areas. Median category underlined.

Speaker:	SWEDISH				FINNISH			
Understood: difficult	5	0	0	8	0	5	6	0
strange	16	17	0	33	8	16	0	11
humorous	0	6	0	8	8	0	6	0
normal	79	72	100	42	75	32	81	63
Not understood: difficult	0	0	0	0	8	11	0	0
strange	0	0	0	0	0	21	0	5
humorous	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	0
normal	0	0	0	0	0	16	6	21
Total understood:	100	95	100	91	91	53	93	74
Listener group:	1	4	2	3	3	2	4	1
± Presupp'n/Focus:	-P	-F	+P	+F	-P	-F	+P	+F

  

Speaker:	AUSTRALIAN				ENGLISH			
Understood: difficult	16	5	0	12	6	25	5	0
strange	0	0	0	6	24	8	0	0
humorous	0	0	8	0	0	17	0	0
normal	68	16	83	53	71	25	85	95
Not understood: difficult	0	21	8	6	0	0	0	5
strange	5	16	0	0	0	8	5	0
humorous	0	0	0	6	0	17	0	0
normal	11	42	0	18	0	0	5	0
Total understood:	84	21	91	71	100	75	90	95
Listener group:	2	1	3	4	4	3	1	2
± Presupp'n/Focus:	-P	-F	+P	+F	-P	-F	+P	+F

Table 3. Results of Contextual Appropriacy Investigation in percentage of subject responses. In four categories, for Understood, and Not understood.

Notes

1. For discussion of the theory of speech acts involving foreigners, see Heckman 1977.
2. For discussion of extra-linguistic factors in the speech situation, see Malmberg 1971, chapter 3; and 1973, chapter 11.
3. See Stroud, this volume, for discussion of:
  - (i) treating all immigrants as semilingual unless/until they prove to be otherwise.
  - (ii) the dubiousness of concluding intellectual deficiency from just one concept of linguistic ability. See also Hanségård 1968.
  - (iii) the parallel between monolinguals of low socio-economic status and bi-/semilinguals with regard to Bernstein's theories about the interrelation between the degree of elaboration of the linguistic code being used; and success at school. See also Bernstein 1971 and 1972.
  - (iv) the context dependence of satisfactory social interaction, and the need for adequate (native) linguistic competence to achieve this.
4. See Lambert 1972, for reports of investigations involving bilingual French/English Canadians, and the attitudes of the two language communities to the informants in their two guises.
5. To whom go my heartfelt thanks.
6. For discussion of the stereotyped nature of listeners' judgements of speaker characteristics based on voice quality, see Laver and Hutcherson 1972, Part three.
7. Literal translation: 'Can we get energy from the sun? Yes, in a milieu-friendly but expensive way through suncells, which can change sunlight into ordinary electricity.'
8. See Loman 1974 a and b; Labov 1972 and Lambert 1972 for different attitudinal areas investigated.
9. Figures reported in Statens Invandrarverk 1976.
10. See Dahlstedt and Teleman 1974, for attitudes to dialects.
11. My thanks go to the members of the Linguistics post-graduate seminar for discussion.

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