

# English in contemporary Sweden: Perceptions, policies, and narrated practices<sup>1</sup>

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This paper compares trends in Sweden's language planning and language policies, and particularly the rationale underlying recent government legislation, to actual language use at the 'grass roots' of society, in order to investigate the extent to which academic and official rationales are confirmed by observed language practices. The passing of the Swedish Language Act of 2009 followed debates in academia and the media which not infrequently characterised English as a major threat to the survival of Swedish. However, despite the strong belief in the utility of English widely held in Sweden, the Swedish language is the preferred language of Swedes as well as immigrants in most domains. These results reveal a contradiction between the arguments put forward by a number of academics, educators and journalists concerning the 'threat' of English, and the language practices of ordinary folk in their daily lives.

Denna artikel presenterar en jämförande studie mellan de senare årens utveckling i Sverige vad gäller språkplanering – med särskild tonvikt på den grund som den nyligen antagna språklagstiftningen vilar på – och den dagliga språkanvändningen inom det svenska samhället. Det huvudsakliga syftet är att därmed vinna ytterligare insikt i och förståelse för hur de tankar och den ideologi som ligger till grund för den nuvarande språkpolitiken framstår i jämförelse med den faktiska språkanvändningen inom dagens svenska samhälle. När Sverige nyligen (2009) antog den s.k. Språklagen följdes detta av en livlig debatt både bland akademiker och i media, i vilken det engelska språket inte sällan framställdes som ett påtagligt och överhängande hot mot svenskans överlevnad. Resultaten av denna studie visar dock på att det svenska språket bland etniska svenskar utan tvivel är det språk som fortfarande föredras och används inom de flesta språkliga domäner, trots en stark övertygelse inom samma grupp om engelskans praktiska användbarhet och nytta inom en mängd områden. Resultaten pekar dessutom på att det bland flyktingar, invandrare, samt andra nyanlända till Sverige anses viktigare att behärska svenska än engelska för att komma in i samt etablera sig i det svenska samhället, och att engelskan främst upplevs vara till nytta under den första tiden i det nya samhället. Sammanfattningsvis så pekar dessa resultat på en diskrepans mellan å ena sidan de argument som framförts av vissa akademiker, lärare, och

journalister vad gäller engelskans påstådda hot mot svenskans bestånd, och å andra sidan det språkbruk och den språkanvändning som en rad olika kategorier av svenskar de facto uppvisar i sina dagliga liv. [Swedish]

**KEYWORDS:** English in Sweden, ideology, immigration, language debates, language planning, language policies, sociolinguistics, Swedish language

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## INTRODUCTION

Sweden is often seen as a society where English is successfully taught and learnt by schoolchildren at all levels with a high degree of success (e.g. Ferguson 1994). Indeed, from the 1950s to the present, English has been enthusiastically learnt and used by an ever-increasing proportion of the population, across all walks of life. In addition to its use as an additional language of education, English is widely used throughout Swedish industry and business, and has a prominent place in popular culture through television, the Internet and other mass media. The most recent Eurobarometer data for Sweden place it alongside the Netherlands as having one of the highest proportions of English speakers (89%) in the whole of Europe (European Commission 2006: 13). In contemporary Swedish society, however, the popularity of English has not met with uniform approval. Since the late 1990s, at least, concerns have been expressed by many Swedish academics and other commentators about the growing presence and alleged dominance of English in particular sectors of Swedish society, including higher education, which have contributed a discourse of complaint and concern, in Swedish academia and in the serious and popular press.

In recent years, this complaint tradition has found expression in and support from the Swedish parliament, in a succession of government reports on language policies and language planning, and in recent legislation that, through a national Language Act, has prescribed that, with effect from July 2009, Swedish is, for the first time, the official 'main language' of Swedish society. The tone of the debate that preceded this legislation may be judged from the following extract from a not untypical article campaigning for a national language law, which appeared in one of the most popular national newspapers in the mid-2000s. This article was titled '*Nog!*' ('Enough!');

The reluctance to assert, let alone legislate, that Swedish should be an official language in Sweden depends on the fact that the government does not realise that English constitutes the main threat to the survival of Swedish. [...] A language does not die because of borrowing words from other languages, but because it ceases to be used in certain settings, through so-called 'domain loss'. In higher education, Swedish is definitively threatened. [...] We need a language law that supports our best language in Sweden by drawing a line: here, but no further. Because you don't really know when you're going to be boiled, if, in the beginning, you're only in luke-warm water. (Lindblom 2005; own translation)

Complaints about English have also been motivated by the increased use of English as a teaching medium in secondary schools, the use of English instead of Swedish in the European Union (EU), concerns about the learning of other European and Scandinavian languages, the impact of English loanwords, the 'anglification' of the Swedish lexicon, the use of English in Swedish advertising and websites, and even the popularity of English terms in ice-hockey and film titles (Språkförsvaret 2011). The cumulative effect of many of the language debates of the last decade or so has been to highlight the 'threat' of English not only to the Swedish language but, by extension, to a number of Swedish institutions, and even, to some extent, to the essence of Swedish identity itself. In many respects, one can appreciate and understand such concerns, as, from an international perspective, Swedish, with its nine-million-plus speakers may be seen as a 'minority language' in the world arena (Hyltenstam 1999). At the same time, these concerns, which have led to a number of policy initiatives culminating in the 2009 Language Act, need to be understood in their historical context.

For us, these public discussions of official language policies raised the question of whether current realities at the grass roots of society actually confirm the claim that English is a serious threat to the Swedish language. In order to investigate this issue, a total of 28 individuals were interviewed about their language practices and preferences in an exploratory study, which was designed to explore the linguistic realities of Swedish society outside academia and the business world. Previous studies have mostly focussed on these elite domains of language use, which are 'high status and high prestige', as demonstrated by 'the highly competitive requirements for entry (e.g. graduation from a selective high school or university program)' (Berg, Hult and King 2001: 306). In our research, we concentrated instead on 'folk domains', that is, social settings unassociated with high status or prestige.

Our conscious rationale for this was that the social settings associated with the daily lives of ordinary people account for the majority of their linguistic interactions, and thus have the potential to yield data most indicative of the status and functions of English, Swedish and other languages in contemporary Swedish society (for a discussion of the sociolinguistic relevance of such studies elsewhere, see Meierkord 2012). Our approach in this paper also resonates with recent work on the sociolinguistics of globalisation associated with Blommaert (2010), who argues that given the shifting linguistic terrain of many societies, there is a need 'to focus on how linguistic resources are actually employed, and under what conditions, in real societies', particularly in contexts marked by inequality and mobility (Blommaert 2010: 194).

Responses collected through 28 ethnographic interviews with individuals from backgrounds as diverse as Ghanaian hairdressers, Iraqi engineers, Moroccan nurses or Swedish church assistants, reveal the complexity of the functions which English performs in the diverse communicative practices in Sweden today. They indicate that, in contrast to elite settings such as business

and tertiary education, Swedish is firmly established as the preferred language in almost all other domains of daily life. Our findings further suggest that the motivations underlying a number of Sweden's recent language policy initiatives are only indirectly explained by official pronouncements, and we conclude by suggesting an alternative explanation of the language debates that preceded the 2009 Language Act.

## THE SPREAD OF ENGLISH, LINGUISTIC ANXIETIES AND LANGUAGE POLICY

### *From internationalism to anxiety*

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Swedish sense of national identity was typically tied to notions of Germanic kinship and the national-Romantic movement that had a strong influence in Sweden in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the post-war era after 1945, which saw the creation of the modern Swedish state, an overtly-expressed ideology of nationalism became less acceptable, particularly in educated and intellectual circles. After 1945, English replaced German as the first second-language of education, and was soon widely and well taught in most Swedish schools. English television and media also became popular from the 1960s onwards, so that between the 1960s and the present, the proportion of the population claiming some knowledge of the language has grown dramatically. The ethos of the new Social-Democratic Sweden was internationalist, outward-looking, and progressive, and in the early 1970s there was a government-backed push to encourage all adults, as well as schoolchildren, to gain at least some competence in the English language. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Swedes developed a growing sense of pride and self-confidence in their proficiency in the English language, which gained them a reputation alongside Holland as having a high collective competence in the language (Oakes 2001). From the 1960s to the 2000s, the government generally took a benevolently non-interventionist approach to language planning, at least at the macro-sociolinguistic level. Unlike France, for example, there was no government-sanctioned legislation to prescribe Swedish as the *de jure* official or national language of society, although, as in Britain and the U.S., Swedish had this twin status in an unchallenged *de facto* sense, not least in such domains as government, law, and education.

In recent years, however, concerns about the spread of English in Sweden have grown, with particular reference to the issue of 'domain loss', and the extent to which Swedish has been displaced by English in certain settings, including business, culture and entertainment, as well as education, research and science, and even government and politics (Teleman 1992; Teleman and Westman 1997; Hyltenstam 1999; Falk 2001). By the early 1990s, it was found that – with the notable exception of law – around 90 percent of PhD

theses at Uppsala University in scientific and technical fields were being written in English (Gunnarson and Öhman 1997; Gunnarsson 2004). Academic concerns co-occurred with political discussions on the need for a language policy for Sweden, debates about which may be traced back to a tradition of *språkvård* (or 'language cultivation') which dates from the sixteenth century (Dahlstedt 1976; Hyltenstam 1999). Despite this long tradition, however, official government legislation for macro-level language planning purposes is of very recent origin.

### *The background to the Swedish Language Act of 2009*

The first major initiatives for language planning in Sweden in recent years came not from domestic imperatives but as a result of Sweden joining the European Union in 1995. In the late 1990s, in response to the Council of Europe's work on the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (1992), the Swedish government began to look more closely at language policy matters, and, eventually, in April 2000 officially recognised five 'official national minority languages': Sami, Finnish, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romani Chib and Yiddish. Around the same time, in 1997, the Swedish Language Council was instructed by the government to investigate the need for an official language policy in support of Swedish. This resulted in the publication of a 1998 report on language policy that was to set the agenda for a decade of discussions concerning language policy and language planning in Sweden (Swedish Language Council 1998a).

The major aim of the 1998 *Action Programme* was to strengthen the position of the Swedish language in Sweden, and to this end the programme suggested that '[t]he position of the Swedish language in Sweden should be established by law' with the overarching objective 'that Swedish should be preserved as a complete language serving the needs of society [*ett samhällsbärande och komplett språk*]' (Swedish Language Council 1998a, b: 1–2). Other specific suggestions included:

- defending the status of Swedish as an official language of the European Union;
- that the language used in teaching and examinations in undergraduate university education should 'normally' be Swedish;
- that knowledge of Swedish should normally be a requirement for university studies and university teachers;
- that PhD dissertations written in a language other than Swedish should include a summary in Swedish; and
- that the language used in Swedish high schools should normally be Swedish.

The 1998 *Action Programme* was followed by a series of policy documents over the following ten years that included the *Report of the Committee on the Swedish*

*Language* (Swedish Government 2002), and the ‘*Best Language*’ *Proposition* (Swedish Government 2005), all of which contributed to, and culminated in the Language Act (Swedish Government 2009).

The Swedish government’s *Language Act* (2009) officially designated Swedish as ‘the main language of Sweden’ for the first time in the history of the nation (Swedish Government 2009). The provisions of the law foregrounded the status of Swedish, and also designated five official ‘national minority’ languages, as set out below:<sup>2</sup>

### **The Swedish language**

4. Swedish is the main language of Sweden.
5. As the main language, it serves as the common language in Swedish society that everyone should have access to and that can be used in all sectors of society.
6. Public institutions have a special responsibility to ensure that Swedish is used and developed.

### **The national minority languages**

7. The national minority languages in Sweden are Finnish, Yiddish, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romany Chib and Sami.
8. Public institutions have a special responsibility to protect and promote the national minority languages. (Swedish Government 2009; own translation from Swedish)

The Language Act was accompanied by, or rather preceded by, another Swedish government report, which presented the rationale for the various measures set out in the proposed Act. This was entitled *Värna språken: förslag till språklag* (‘Protecting languages: A proposal for a Language Act’). At the outset, the report made the case for the need for such legislation by reference to sociolinguistic situation, the spread of English and the impact of immigration on Swedish society.

Growing internationalisation is the factor that has had the greatest impact on the status of Swedish in Sweden. This has led, for example, to the increasing use of English in many areas, either replacing Swedish entirely or alongside Swedish. The fact that at least 150 different mother tongues are now spoken in Sweden also places the focus on issues involving the status of Swedish and other languages. Since 2000, five languages have been officially classified as national minority languages in Sweden. The circumstances described above give cause for establishing the status of Swedish and other languages and determining how these languages can best be safeguarded so as to preserve language diversity. (Swedish Government 2008: 19)

Interestingly, a number of concerns about the continuing spread of English seem difficult to explain given what we know about speaker numbers and population statistics. Migrants from countries where English is used as a first or

second language amounted to approximately 120,000 in 2009, accounting for only 1.3 percent of the Swedish population. As Table 1 indicates, the most important English-using countries of origin are Great Britain, the United States of America and the diverse countries on the Indian subcontinent. Statistically, English is evidently a home or 'first' language for only a small minority of immigrants, a fact which clearly suggests that the perceived threat of English in Sweden has not been motivated by an influx of immigrants from traditional 'English-speaking' societies.

### SOCIETAL ELITES, THE GRASS ROOTS AND LINGUISTIC PREFERENCES

While public debates in Sweden have contributed to a discourse of Swedish under threat or displaced by English in recent years, most evidence for this has been drawn from tendencies in such elite domains as the business world and higher education. However, despite Sweden's own self-reflexive imaginary of itself as a social democratic and egalitarian society, the class stratification of Swedish society is a social fact noted even by government agencies (Statistics Sweden 1982). In contemporary Sweden, class often overlaps with race and ethnicity, as pointedly discussed in Allan Pred's seminal work on immigration and racism in Swedish society, *Even in Sweden* (Pred 2000).

As in other societies, the linguistic ecology of Sweden varies according to the linguistic practices of differing socio-economic groups, and English in Sweden has very different uses in different social settings and among different social groupings. From a Bourdieuan perspective, English may have a high symbolic value for some, but not for others, and, from a sociological perspective, the language preferences of the so-called elite can be distinguished from those of the masses in various ways (Bourdieu 1991). Skuttnabb-Kangas (1981: 97)

**Table 1:** Immigrant groups having English as a first or second language in 2009 (Statistics Sweden 2010a)

	Country of origin	No. of individuals
1	Great Britain	20,368
2	United States of America	16,555
3	India	16,457
4	The Philippines	9,261
5	Pakistan	9,161
6	Sri Lanka	6,652
7	Bangladesh	5,500
8	Gambia	3,609
9	Australia	3,158
10	Canada	2,950
11	Uganda	2,853

has usefully differentiated between the 'elite bilingualism' of the highly educated, who typically learn English and other second languages through high-status educational institutions, and the 'folk bilingualism' of those who acquire a second or foreign language through grass-roots interaction with other speakers.

Consequently, micro-sociolinguistic studies focusing on the reality of individual experiences have the potential to yield rich insights into the realities of lived linguistic experiences, as studies that have been conducted over the last decade have documented. These have included Lanza (2007) on the Filipino community in Oslo, Guido (2008) on language use by West African refugees in Italy, and Blommaert (2010) on the immigrant context in Brussels. The particular need for a host language or for other languages may vary greatly from one context to another, and, cumulatively, such studies have shown that, in many societies, English is used for a wide variety of individual purposes, depending on individuals' personal histories and the communicative needs of their lives. The next section considers whether, in Sweden, the use of English is of a type and quantity that justifies serious concern about the status of the Swedish language.

## **SOCIOLINGUISTIC REALITIES AT THE GRASS ROOTS OF SWEDISH SOCIETY**

### ***Data collection***

To gain insights into the behaviour at the grass roots of Swedish society, qualitative interviews were conducted in Stockholm in spring 2009. These took the form of semi-structured interviews, which were carried out with two interviewees, allowing interactions to take place not only between interviewer and interviewee but also across interviewees. Whilst the interviews aimed at covering a range of aspects (e.g. language use in the family, friendship, work, and media domains, in spoken and written registers, and receptive as well as productive), they followed an open-ended design, and interviewees were given as much opportunity as possible to influence and control the course of the conversation (cf. Codó 2008; Zhu Hua and David 2008). Meinhof (2009) describes clearly how such ethnographic linguistic research which combines 'long narrative interviews and in-depth discourse analysis of the data' (2009: 150) lends itself to uncovering individuals' communicative practices. In our data, a number of issues were elicited that the interviewees themselves considered important, some of which we had not originally thought to scrutinize.

The 28 interviewees were 21 females and seven males, aged between 19 and 57 years.<sup>3</sup> Six of them may be labelled 'ethnic Swedes', as they had been born in the country of 'native' Swedish parents. All other speakers, or their parents, originate from Algeria, Estonia, Germany, Ghana, Great Britain, Iraq, Ireland,

Japan, Jordan, Morocco, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Tunisia, Ukraine and the United States of America. Since we aimed at covering the variety of immigrant experiences as much as possible, their share of our sample is comparatively high. Most of the interviewees had a first language other than Swedish or English. The latter was a first language to the British, the Irish and the American interviewees, and spoken as a second language by the Ghanaian female. Sixteen of the interviewees were enrolled in English classes at an adult education institution at the time of the interviews (the demographic details of interviewees are set out in the Appendix).

The interviews did not aim to cover the Swedish population in any representative sense, but, rather, in light of the heterogeneity of contemporary Swedish society, they aimed to shed light on those factors that might influence individuals' language choices and preferences in specific domains or for particular communicative purposes. In the discussion of results below, we follow a mixed-method approach, presenting both quantitative and qualitative results (Creswell 2003). The interviews are initially discussed from a quantitative and comparative perspective, in order to identify overall tendencies emerging from the interviewees' narratives. These results are then supplemented by a detailed discussion of individual excerpts from the interviews.

### *General trends in language use in Swedish society*

A comparison of all 28 interviewees' responses reveals that statements in response to individual questions were, as expected, very heterogeneous, and reflected the interviewees' individual circumstances and preferences. Despite this diversity, however, a number of clear tendencies emerged across all individual statements. Table 2 summarises those language preferences that were narrated in all interviews and thus allowed for a quantitative investigation.

One clear tendency that became visible from the interview data was the discrepancy between the uses, or non-uses, of English in written and spoken domains. Both receptively and productively, interviewees reported that they rarely engaged with English in its written form. None of the interviewees claimed to read English newspapers, while novels and other books were only read by those who consciously wished to improve their command of English. A total of eight speakers reported that they never read English books, while five responded that they did so only occasionally. Some interviewees, however, stated that they read English magazines, mainly fashion magazines, as well as Internet websites.

A similarly heterogeneous picture emerged as regards the interviewees' productive use of written English. According to their reports, one domain in which English was frequently used in writing is the work domain. For example, Shamen, originally a self-employed engineer in Dubai, explained

**Table 2:** Selected language choices

Interviewees' reported preferences for language use	No. of respondents*
Reading English books for pleasure	6 / 16
Reading English newspapers	0 / 8
Writing personal letters in English	3 / 8
Writing personal emails in English	5 / 5
Using English at work regularly	3 / 7
Preferring English films to Swedish ones	10 / 17
Preferring Swedish films to English ones	2 / 17
No general preference regarding the language of films	5 / 17
Watching televised news in English	1 / 7

\*This table indicates in raw form the language preferences of respondents who reported regular engagement in certain language activities. Thus, of those 16 respondents who stated that they read books, six declared a preference for English; of those who reported reading newspapers, no-one stated that they read English-language newspapers; etc.

that he needed to take an English course 'because I'm very bad in the writing word'. Significantly, however, English was not typically dominant in the work domain of the interviewees. The following quote by Irish-born Ann-Marie indicates that proficiency in Swedish is often more important and that a command of English did not necessarily put one at an advantage in the work domain.

#### Excerpt 1<sup>4</sup>

- 1 Ann-Marie: I am the only non-Swede at the Human Resources  
 2 Department, and it was very tough in the beginning. It  
 3 was not as if people were making exceptions for me  
 4 because I wasn't Swedish, if you know what I mean. So  
 5 being an English speaker was not a plus at work, but  
 6 becoming fluent in Swedish was crucial for my  
 7 development within the company.

In other contexts, however, the professional requirements for certain jobs may provide the incentive for immigrants to acquire English as well as Swedish, as is the case for Selma in Excerpt 2.

#### Excerpt 2

- 1 Selma: I'm obliged to study English, because I want to be **uhm**  
 2 **sjuusköterska** [nurse]. I don't know in English. (..) Ah  
 3 yes a nurse, and it's obligatory to have **eh** (at the station)  
 4 in English.

In private domains, the productive use of written English seemed to be negligible. Only three informants, a Swede, an Estonian and a Ghanaian,

reported writing letters in English; in contrast, Shamen explained that ‘I used to write but sorry for that I always in Dubai I have eh how to say like *sekreter* she always to take it’. Mailiqia, a 24-year-old woman from Estonia, reported writing letters ‘sometimes (..) with my friend’, and stated that ‘I’m better to write English and read English as to talk’. In general, only those interviewees who had English as their first or second language used English to write emails, contributions to Internet chats, and text messages in private domains, when communicating with relatives or friends. Alice explained that ‘sometimes I write I send email to my husband at work if I want to sometime when he did something I don’t like it’.

As far as we can tell from our data, text messages were normally written in Swedish or in the interviewee’s first language, unless they were directed to an individual’s English-speaking relative or friend. However, one Japanese-born interviewee reported interacting with her Japanese friend in online chats in English, since her computer did not allow her to display Japanese characters, and because the use of Roman letters to write Japanese led to misunderstandings.

### Excerpt 3

- |    |              |  |
|----|--------------|--|
| 1  | Keiko:       | Yeah, yes even when I write email to Japanese friend eh          |
| 2  |              | because something the problem in my (X X) <b>eh</b>              |
| 3  |              | computer cannot read Japanese so we so we had to have            |
| 4  |              | to write <b>eh</b> in English instead of Japanese                |
|    |              | [...]  |
| 5  | Interviewer: | <i>Mhmh</i> that is quite interesting because I I would assume   |
| 6  |              | that you what what I would probably do is write                  |
| 7  |              | Japanese with the Roman alphabet.                                |
| 8  | Keiko:       | <b>Uh</b> yeah <b>eh</b> we found that if write Japanese word in |
| 9  |              | Roman of that it become very very long word and then             |
| 10 |              | difficult to read one word what this mean and that come          |
| 11 |              | here long time to take. So if we write English we                |
| 12 |              | understand clearly better than Japanese with Romans.             |

One area where answers were relatively homogeneous concerned the use of media, and respondents’ linguistic preferences when watching films in the cinema or on TV, as well as their choice of music. With reference to films, the overall trend was for interviewees to prefer American and British movies to Swedish ones, because, as Sofie noted, ‘they [the Americans and British] do very good films’. Similarly, Maddie explained that she herself did not ‘find the Swedish scripts or actors very interesting’. Only two interviewees said that they never watched English films and preferred Swedish ones, with one interviewee, Selma, here reporting that this was motivated by her desire to improve her proficiency in Swedish.

**Excerpt 4**

- 1           Selma:           I want to watch English films but it's more important to  
 2                               watch Swedish films to take more and more information  
 3                               and more words. That's why I force myself to watch  
 4                               Swedish films. That **eh** because I'm living in **eh** Swedish  
 5                               society I must have contact with them. I'm obliged to  
 6                               watch Swedish to to improve my language.

Those interviewees who made statements concerning their choice of popular music generally listened to English music. Mailiqlia, the Estonian, and Maddie, an ethnic Swede, explained that 'no way no it would happen sometimes a summer song'. Sofie, the Swedish-born, even stated that 'I I write in both lololo songs in both Swedish and English'. Despite the scarcity of comments on this domain, both statements confirm observations which have been made previously (e.g. Melchers and Shaw 2003) that the majority of songs and films released in Sweden are now in English. This might not necessarily reflect a linguistic dominance per se, but rather point to the power of American popular culture across Scandinavia in a more general sense.

*Narrated immigrant experiences*

A number of insights into the special circumstances of immigrants and their linguistic choices were also provided by the interviews, when immigrants narrated their uses of English and Swedish in their daily life, pre-immigration, in intimate relationships, in their social networks, and in their comments on language shift in the immigrant second generation.

Many of our interviewees lived in internationally-mixed marriages and partnerships, and maintained multinational friendship networks, all of which influenced their linguistic choices in diverse situations for various functions. Their narratives on the interplay of their private backgrounds and the resulting language preferences are highly revealing with regard to individuals' shift towards Swedish and the importance that immigrants attached to learning Swedish.

Immigrants do not arrive in their new home country as *tabulae rasae* in terms of their previous knowledge of languages. In many cases, Swedish citizens from an immigrant background have learnt English in their original home country. For example, Selma said that she 'studied in Morocco French *och* ('and') English'. In contrast to Shamen, who was mentioned above, Selma did not have a history of using English outside the classroom in her original home country, while others grew up in contexts where English was used as an official language and served as a second language for sections of the population. In these latter cases, individuals had frequently used English in their home countries. Alice was one such person, explaining that 'we do say

sometime we said English is our first language. It's not the first, we have our own language (...) before English'. Individuals who had acquired English before immigrating to Sweden seemed to rely on the language as a *lingua franca* during the early part of their stay in Sweden. This was the case, for example, with Hedeba, who had acquired English through formal instruction from the age of five onwards, before she immigrated to Sweden at the age of 18. Her statement revealed that her initial use of English was because, on arrival, she had only very limited access to Swedish language classes, as she had not been granted refugee status. Here, an important factor determining language use was evidently the legalistic reality of gaining a place in the new society.

### Excerpt 5

- 1 Hedeba: When I came to Sweden the first two years I speak only  
 2 English with the people.  
 3 Interviewer: *Uhuh.*  
 4 Hedeba: That was little sss hard to learn Swedish directly  
 5 Interviewer: *Mhnh.*  
 6 Hedeba: So I start studying **eh** Swedish and using English in the  
 7 streets because **eh** in the beginning it was ok I can ask  
 8 the people but when they answer me it was very difficult  
 9 to understand what they are saying-  
 10 Interviewer: -in Swedish.  
 11 Hedeba: They answer very quickly.  
 12 Interviewer: I have the same problem exactly the same problem.  
 13 Hedeba: And it was **eh** difficult to because **eh** I I I spoke English  
 14 for this long time because it was difficult to go school  
 15 I didn't have the permission to stay here in Sweden.

As Hedeba indicated, in the early stages especially, English was used 'in the streets' for everyday purposes such as doing one's shopping, asking for directions, etc. In fact, many immigrants seemed to simply experience English largely as a useful alternative to Swedish, as the next excerpt, from the interview with Russian female Mickey, suggests.

### Excerpt 6

- 1 Mickey: Yes, it's **eh** it's like alternative language here, because  
 2 you feel **eh** like what we are right now **eh** don't know  
 3 perfect **eh eh** Swedish language and of course **eh** when  
 4 we try to find something to explain but we can inte  
 5 (('not')) find **eh** Swedish word enough.  
 6 Mouse: Yes.  
 7 Mickey: And that is why we **eh** use English.  
 8 Mouse: English.  
 9 Mickey: Som alternativ språk. (('As an alternative language.')

In response to this practice, local Swedes also appreciate English as being helpful in interactions with those recent immigrants whose proficiency in Swedish is still too limited to allow for successful and meaningful communication. Sofie, a 20-year-old ethnic Swede, made the following statement after having been asked why she thought she would need English for her future career as a leisure activities teacher in a church.

### Excerpt 7

- |    |             |   |
|----|-------------|---|
| 1  | Sofie:      | <b>Uhm</b> I'm because <b>uhm</b> I won't be/ I don't know the  |
| 2  |             | name in English, but in the/ I will work in the church          |
| 3  |             | with the teenage (..) young people. (..) In Swedish we          |
| 4  |             | call it the fritidspedagog [leisure activities teacher], but    |
| 5  |             | I don't know the name in English. (..) <b>Uhm</b> one of the    |
| 6  |             | things is that it takes care about the confi candidate. And     |
| 7  |             | maybe you'll take care about children or (..) <b>uhm</b> adults |
| 8  |             | so old people.  |
| 9  | Researcher: | Do you think you'll need English for this job?                  |
| 10 | Sofie:      | Well sometime if if if the came some by the (X) don't           |
| 11 |             | can Swedish   |

Sofie's comments about the church context also indicate that, in Sweden, English is sometimes used in the domain of the church and related activities. Church communities in Sweden, as elsewhere in Europe, have witnessed a decrease in active members over recent decades, and are often very happy to integrate new members from an immigrant background. In addition, new church communities have emerged in Sweden which have their roots outside of the country, as is the case with the Anglican Church and even the Ugandan Church in Swedish society. Agneta, another interviewee, also reported that English was spoken in the Anglican Church that she and her husband attended. And Guilielmo explained that in his church community English is used for services, even though most of its members come from Latin America.

However, despite such uses of English in daily life, the linguistic ecology encountered by most immigrants in Sweden was similar to that described by Blommaert (2010: 8) for Belgium, where 'English [...] is not part of the repertoire of most other immigrants in the neighbourhood.' In Sweden, the use of Swedish as a lingua franca is the dominant linguistic reality in immigrant neighbourhoods. At the same time, however, diverse intimate relationships frequently develop between ethnic Swedes and immigrants or between immigrants with different first-language backgrounds. Initially, this often results in relationships where communication in either of the partners' first languages is not possible, and where, as in the case of Selma, 'in the first we speak just English'. The following quote by Mickey, a female immigrant from Russia, indicates that these marriages or partnerships are also a locus for the use of English as a lingua franca.

**Excerpt 8**

- 1 Interviewer: And you when you talk to your husband in Russian is it  
2 or-
- 3 Mickey: **Eh** nej (('no')) **eh** nej he is **eh** svenska man **eh** Swedish  
4 man and of course in the beginning we talking only in  
5 englishka.
- 6 Interviewer: *Uhuh* in English *mh*.
- 7 Mickey: English and **eh** right now **eh** we try to speak in **eh** in  
8 Swedish **eh** but it's **eh** problem that I mix right now  
9 learned everything what I know
- 10 Interviewer: *Mh*.
- 11 Mickey: Swed es se so right now we (prat) in a special dialect **eh**  
12 *svenska svensk* english dialect ya it's not so easy for us  
13 because I must (*entlig*) I must **eh** (*entligen*) how do they
- 14 Mouse: Finally-.
- 15 Mickey: Finally.
- 16 Interviewer: Finally.
- 17 Mickey: I must finally to **eh** [...] to speak [...] in one only
- 18 Mouse: [speak] [speak]
- 19 Mickey: language.
- 20 Interviewer: One language, *mh*.
- 21 Mickey: Yes and **eh** intermix. [...] So it's not so easy.
- 22 Interviewer: [*Mhmh.*]
- 23 But you don't use any Russian at home with your  
24 husband.
- 25 Mickey: No.
- 26 Interviewer: No.
- 27 Mickey: It is no Russian.

The reasons for Selma and Mickey using English in intimate relationships are similar to those offered by Hedeba in Excerpt 5 for interactions with Swedes at a more general level. Their reports indicate that, in the immigrant experience, English functions as a lingua franca at a stage when Swedish does not yet allow for satisfying interactions. Crucially, English is used alongside Swedish in marriages between immigrants and Swedes. As Mickey's explanation above reveals, her first language, Russian, is not a language chosen for communication between her and her Swedish husband. Interestingly, things may be similar even in marriages between two immigrants of different first-language backgrounds, as is the case with Shamen and his wife. Shamen initially used English in interaction with his Polish wife: 'when I met her we didn't have one language we talk English in the beginning eh then after that we started of Swedish at home' (see also Piller 2002).

As in the case of intimate relationships, the exact composition of friendship networks also determines uses of Swedish and English, although, when communication occurs between spouses or with friends outside the family, a highly variegated picture emerges. Not infrequently, the social networks of

individual speakers are distinctly multinational and multilingual. Agneta, for example, has friends from Chile, Poland, Canada, and England, and often uses English when she meets her friends. By contrast, Irish-born Ann-Marie had already acquired Swedish before she moved to Stockholm with her Swedish husband. Her friends include many Swedes, who, she comments, 'all want to speak Swedish, not English'. Similarly, immigrants explain that their relatives' relationships as well as the composition of their social networks determine the use of Swedish or English, or both. As Alice explains, 'my husband brother married to Swedish, when she is around then we speak Swedish, because we don't want to change the language'. Shamen states that, as most of his friends from Arabic-speaking countries have Polish or Swedish wives, 'when we sit all together we have to speak eh Swedish the most, sometimes English because one of them he marry with English lady'.

In many of the migration contexts referred to in the interviews, children do not normally communicate with their parents in English, but in either Swedish or the mother tongue of one of the parents. The following example indicates that this does not apply in all cases, as Agneta reports:

### Excerpt 9

- 1 Agneta: I only speak Swedish to my two children. I could  
 2 never speak any other language to them, even if I was  
 3 not living in Sweden. My husband used to speak English  
 4 to our son when he was younger, but has given up on  
 5 that now.

Often, the children grow up using Swedish with their peers in kindergarten and school. As a result, even those children from parents who both do not have Swedish as their first language may prefer to use Swedish in the home and with their parents, as the following excerpt indicates.

### Excerpt 10

- 1 Shamen: **Eh** I use English because **eh** my wife she's Polish  
 2 Interviewer: *Mhmh.*  
 3 Shamen: When I met her we didn't have one language we talk  
 4 English in the beginning **eh** then after that we started of  
 5 Swedish at home, [(..)]because with children children  
 6 Interviewer: [*Mh.*]  
 7 Shamen: they speak Swedish you know in the kindergarten [(..)]  
 8 Interviewer: [*Mhmh.*]  
 9 Shamen: and at home also-  
 10 Interviewer: *Uhuh.*  
 11 Shamen: Sorry for that my daughter she does speak Arabic but  
 12 when I talk to her in Arabic she answers me in Swedish.  
 13 Interviewer: *Uhuh* usual thing. I just heard that from **uhm** Selma as  
 14 well.  
 15 Alice: Yes that is the usual.

Shamen's experience with his daughter is apparently similar to that of many immigrants. Without support for their original first languages, their children's ability to use and understand this language is frequently reduced, resulting in language attrition at the level of the individual. At a community level, this often leads to language shift towards the dominant language spoken in the new country of residence. In addition to the shift to Swedish which occurs in the second generation, official uses of Swedish in Sweden encourage immigrants to focus on the acquisition of Swedish rather than English. This necessity was clearly expressed by Anja, who commented that 'if you live eh in Sweden, I think eh it's more important to learn eh Swedish because uhm if eh (...) *till exempel försäkrings kassan* ('national insurance office') uhm send a letter' this would be in Swedish.

Cumulatively, the views expressed by our interviewees demonstrate that English is frequently used as a lingua franca in Swedish society, not only in the elite domains of the business world and higher education, but also in such folk domains as family, friends and church. In addition, our interview results also suggest that English is largely used receptively, both by immigrants and ethnic Swedes, especially when the language is available as a commodity, in the form of films or music. Reports of activities requiring a form of higher-level engagement, such as watching the news on CNN or BBC, or reading English newspapers or novels, are rare. In broad terms, it would seem that English is often available in many forms, for free, and used as a language of consumption for entertainment purposes, as long as this does not require a great deal of individual effort (Sharp 2001).

Overall, the statements made by our interviewees, then, do not suggest that Swedish is threatened at the grass roots of Swedish society. In reality, the importance of English in Swedish society seems very much restricted to a small number of domains, where the currency of English in such settings may be explained by reference to market forces, as in the case of the business world and academia (Melchers and Shaw 2003).<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, we would argue, there is an evident disjuncture between the macro-sociolinguistic perceptions reported on in the earlier sections of this paper and the linguistic realities that emerge from micro-sociolinguistic examination, which, from the evidence presented above, undermines the oft-rehearsed and reiterated claim that the use of English, in any serious sense, represents a significant threat to the status of Swedish as a national language. Following this, in our concluding section, we therefore propose an alternative explanation of the Language Act 2009.

## AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF SWEDEN'S LANGUAGE ACT

An alternative explanation of the anxieties towards English that partly underpinned the Language Act 2009, may be linked to the vastly changed

demographics of contemporary Sweden, and this society's attempt to come to terms with the multicultural and multilingual dynamics of a society where one fifth of the population have a first- or second-generation immigrant background.

In the 1950s, Sweden was largely ethnically and culturally homogeneous, at least in the view of the collective imaginary, but over the following four decades, the composition and character of Swedish society has changed remarkably, not least because of successive waves of immigration, often from areas of conflict, for humanitarian reasons. Today, it is estimated that fifteen percent of the population was born abroad, and that if second-generation immigrants with two foreign parents are included in the figures, the total of those with a 'foreign background' (i.e. immigrant background) rises to around 19 percent (Statistics Sweden 2010b). In fact, Sweden is well above the European average in the size of its immigrant population (Bengtsson, Lundh and Scott 2005). According to the Swedish census bureau, there are now 206 nationalities listed as living in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2010a). In 2009 the most sizeable groups were Finnish individuals (172,218) and Iraqis (117,919). Considerably smaller but still significant groups of immigrants originate from the former Yugoslavia (71,578), Poland (67,518), Iran (59,922), Bosnia and Herzegovina (56,127), Germany (47,803), Denmark (46,002), Norway (43,819), Turkey (40,766), Somalia (31,734), Thailand (28,739), Chile (28,320), Lebanon (23,701), China (21,202), the U.K. (20,368), Syria (19,646), Rumania (18,532), the U.S. (16,555), and India (16,457).

Such increases in immigration have had a major impact on both the ethnic and linguistic demography of the country, and as the Chilean-born politician Mauricio Rojas notes, ethnic and linguistic diversity now presents a major challenge, as 'Sweden no longer consists of people deeply rooted in Swedish soil and sharing a common cultural identity.'<sup>6</sup> The population has become multi-ethnic, and wherever we look we are struck by its diversity, but the institutional uniformity has survived' (Rojas 2005: 56). For Rojas, the challenge for Sweden is how to adapt to the new realities of a multiculturally-diverse society, very different from the earlier ideal of the Social Democratic *folkhemmet* ('The People's Home'). Thus, he continues:

The old ethnic nation is now a thing of the past, the perspective of uniformity is no longer fruitful and we cannot go on indefinitely denying what we are or what sort of a world we are living in. *Folkhemmet* gave us a secure – and for most people – pleasant home for several decades, but now we have to move on. (Rojas 2005: 56)

The relevance of immigration to the sociolinguistics of contemporary Sweden is, thus, direct. Despite a long history of limited immigration from such societies as Germany, Finland, the Baltics over preceding centuries, pre-war Swedish society was – in relative terms at least – highly homogeneous. Recent work by Milani and Johnson (2008) has emphasised how immigrant groups, in

particular young immigrant men, are constructed as a threatening Other by the media, and how the discourse on varieties of 'immigrant Swedish' (*blattesvenska*) support ideologies of race and normative ethnicity. Despite this, as noted throughout, the dominant lingua franca of most domains, including official domains, in Swedish society is the Swedish language. At the grass roots of Swedish society, among immigrant groups as well as among other less advantaged groups, it is a command of Swedish that is of key importance in gaining employment and finding one's place in society, as evidenced in patterns of language shift in immigrant communities (Namei 2012). Here, therefore, one possible explanation of recent successive moves towards nationally-oriented language policies, culminating in the 2009 Language Act, is that these have been motivated much less by the overt debates about English, and rather more by covert concerns about immigration and the changing ethnic profile of Swedish society. At the same time, Sweden's record on immigration policies over the last few decades has generally remained 'liberal and well-meaning' (Stroud 2004) in comparison with most European societies, and contemporary Swedish society has hitherto retained much of the tolerance associated with its progressive social democratic heritage. In this context, one may conclude that debates over the 'threat' of English may in part represent a displaced discourse reflecting far broader concerns with race and ethnicity in society, ones far less easily voiced and less easily debated, even in such a liberal, well-meaning and democratic society as Sweden.<sup>7</sup>

Given this, as Oakes (2001) notes, 'it is not surprising that postwar immigration to Sweden has contributed to a heightening of ethnic consciousness amongst the dominant group'. Some support for Oakes view might be drawn from recent political events, as the 2010 national elections also saw significant support for the avowedly-nationalist Sweden Democrats, who succeeded in gaining five percent of the vote and twenty seats in the Swedish parliament. The success of an explicitly nationalistic political party, generally perceived in the Swedish media as 'anti-immigrant' has proved embarrassing for the Swedish establishment, but, if nothing else, demonstrates the extent to which the nascent nationalism that Oakes detected at the beginning of the decade managed to find explicit political expression in the contemporary politics of Swedish society.<sup>8</sup> Thus, from the 1960s to the early 2000s, there has been a major shift in national politics, characterised, in simple terms, by a shift away from the idealism of Social Democratic progressivism to contemporary anxieties linked to the demographics and contradictions of a vastly-altered society.

Despite the rhetoric of democratic access and language rights, however, the designation of an official 'main' language is by definition a political act, supported by the political power of the national legislature. One essential problem for the government in formulating language policies in Sweden, Milani and Johnson have argued, is that the 'historical-discursive prerogative' for Sweden as a progressive European democracy has been that it projects itself as 'a

modern, neutral and international state'. Thus, the introduction of a Language Act may be perceived 'as a form of state-induced symbolic discrimination, thereby contradicting the official endorsement of multilingualism and diversity' (Milani and Johnson 2008: 17; see also Milani 2007a, 2007b).

Indeed, despite arguments to the contrary, one rather obvious conclusion to be drawn from the repeated formulation of Swedish language policies over the last decade and more is that these have signalled an ideological shift away from the internationalism and openness of an earlier age towards a more cautious and nationally-oriented stance, as reflected in the linguistic protectionism of the 2009 Language Act, however well-intentioned Swedish language planners and politicians may have been.

## NOTES

1. We wish to thank the Editor, Allan Bell, and Associate Editor, Lionel Wee, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their very thoughtful comments and suggestions. All remaining shortcomings remain, of course, our own responsibility.
2. The other provisions of the Act deal with a number of related issues, including the use and promotion of Swedish sign language, the use of languages in public institutions and public services, the cultivation of specialist Swedish terminology where required, the use of Swedish in international contexts (notably the EU), and 'the individual's right to language'. The official English version of the Language Act in English is available at <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/8317/a/138133>
3. Obviously, the chosen contact strategy resulted in an unintended gender bias in our informants. However, our intention was not to reflect Swedish society in any representative sense. Instead, we selected individuals who were enrolled in English courses at an adult education institution, which thus ensured that the English language played some role in their lives, which in turn gave us the opportunity to investigate the role that the language played in our interviewees' lived experiences.
4. To ensure informants' anonymity, all names have been replaced by pseudonyms, which the interviewees chose themselves. In addition to standard orthography, the following symbols are used in the transcriptions: one or two full stops in round brackets '(.)' and '(..)' for short pauses. Simultaneous speech passages are placed in square brackets. Bold print indicates hesitation phenomena, and italics backchannels. Translations of Swedish words are given in double parentheses where necessary.
5. One aspect which warrants further investigation is the fact that English seems to be making new inroads into the domain of religion (compare with Vaish 2008 on Singapore). In the Swedish context, churches have experienced decreasing numbers of active Swedish members in their congregations, and are often more than willing to accept members who do not speak fluent Swedish. Such uses of languages as lingua francas in trade, academia, and religion are, of course, not new or unusual developments (Meierkord 2006). The histories of such languages as Arabic, German or Latin attest that the use of lingua francas in

itself does not necessarily constitute a threat to other languages in a particular society or linguistic ecology.

6. At the linguistic level, it is now claimed that Arabic is Sweden's 'third largest language' after Swedish and Finnish (although this indicates that Arabic is spoken by less than two per cent of the population), even though, under EU guidelines, the language does not qualify to be classified as an official minority language (Rabo 2010).
7. The perception of English as a threat to the Swedish language may also result from media discussions of this issue, which often focus on the elite domains of academia and business, where English rather than Swedish has achieved dominance for particular purposes.
8. With reference to minority languages, in the late seventies, the Home Language Reform of 1977 also established the much-lauded policy of supporting 'home language' instruction in state schools, to teach regional and immigrant languages to children from non-Swedish backgrounds (Oakes 2001).

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**APPENDIX: Interviewees' demographic details**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	First language	Original home country
Agneta	37	female	Swedish	Sweden
Alice	appr. 40	female	Ewe	Ghana
Alice / Alina	appr. 20	female	Russian	Ukraine
Anja	appr. 30	female	German	Germany
Ann-Marie	37	female	English	Ireland
Camila	23	female	Swedish	Sweden
Celine	n/a	female	German	Germany / Turkish parents
Hedebea	appr. 35	female	Arabic	Jordan
Inger	26	female	Swedish	Sweden
Ingrid	49	female	Swedish	Sweden
Maddie	19	female	Swedish	Sweden
Mailiqa	24	female	Estonian	Estonia
Maria	n/a	female	Swedish / Serbian	Sweden
Mickey	appr. 40	female	Russian	Russia
Mimmi	33	female	Swedish	Sweden
Mouse	22	female	Arabic	Tunisia
Noriko	appr. 35	female	Japanese	Japan
Pete	n/a	male	English	Wales
Ron	n/a	male	English	United States
Selma	appr. 20	female	Arabic	Morocco
Shamen	41	female	Arabic	Dubai
Sofie	20	female	Swedish	Sweden
Tarik	22	male	Swedish / Arabic	Sweden / Algerian parents
Ulf	26	male	Swedish	Sweden
Ulla	57	female	Swedish	Sweden
Guilielmo	20	male	Chile	Spanish
Masoud	52	male	Persian	Iran
Mahyar	43	male	Persian	Iran

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