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Swedish in the spotlight

Abstract (Swedish)

Den svenska språklagen trädde i kraft 2009. Lagen anger att svenska är huvudspråk i Sverige och slår fast att svenska ska kunna användas inom alla samhällsområden. Att ge svenska språket lagstadgad status som huvudspråk var dock inte ett självklart beslut utan snarare resultatet av diskussioner som väcktes bland beslutsfattare under de 20-30 år innan lagen trädde ikraft. Sveriges medlemskap i EU 1995 blev ett slags språkpolitiskt uppvaknande. För första gången diskuterades svenska språket i en minoritetskontext i förhållande till engelskan, men också till de övriga arbetsspråken inom EU. En ökad mångspråkighet och erkännandet av fem nationella minoritetsspråk bidrog också till beslutet om en språklagstiftning.

Abstract (English)

The Swedish Language Act came into force in 2009. The act stipulates Swedish as the principal language in Sweden and establishes that Swedish should be usable in all areas of society. However, formalising the status of the Swedish language in legislation was not an obvious decision, but the result of discussions emerging among Swedish policy makers during the 20-30 years preceding the language act. Sweden's accession to the EU in 1995 was a political awakening in respect of language. For the first time, the Swedish language was placed within a minority context in relation to English but also to the other working languages within the EU. An increasing level of multilingualism and the acknowledgement of five official minority languages were also factors that prompted the formalisation of the Swedish language.

1. Language legislation in Sweden

The Swedish Language Act came into force in 2009 (Language Act 2009:600). The act stipulates Swedish as the principal language in Sweden and provides general guidelines for when Swedish is to be used within the public sector. The act establishes that:

§4: Swedish is the principal language in Sweden.

§5: As the principal language, Swedish is the common language in society that everyone resident in Sweden is to have access to and that is to be usable in all areas of society.

§6: The public sector has a particular responsibility for the use and development of Swedish.

§10: Swedish is the language of the courts, administrative authorities and other bodies that perform tasks in the public sector.

This means that Swedish should be the common language in society and the language of public administration. The act also stipulates that Swedish is to be the official language of Sweden in international contexts and that the status of Swedish as an official EU language is to be safeguarded.

In addition, the Language Act contains provisions on the national minority languages in Sweden and on Swedish sign language, and on the public sector's obligation to provide access to other minority languages. As a whole, the Swedish Language Act supports the concept of Swedish as the principal language, as well as preserving Sweden as a multilingual society with special protection for the national minority languages: Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani, Sami and Yiddish.

Before the passing of the Language Act, the Swedish language did not have formal status in law. In contrast, Finland has had a language act since 2004, establishing Finnish and Swedish as national languages, and an earlier act of 1922 which mentioned the national languages. The Finnish Constitution also refers to the national languages. The Norwegian language act, regulating language use in the public sector, came into force in 1980 and an earlier language act from 1930 also regulated the use of the two written standards of Norwegian, bokmål and nynorsk (SOU 2008:26).

2. Swedish in a non-contested position

Compared to both Norway and Finland, Swedish language policy has been characterised by calmness, both today and historically. Discussions and debates on language have occurred, mainly concerning orthographic issues during the 20th century, but these debates have been settled without serious consequences such as national division (Josephson in preparation).

Since the separation of Denmark and Sweden in the 16th century, Swedish has been seen as a language in its own right, distinct from Danish and Norwegian. The translation of the Bible as part of the Reformation in the 1500s was of great importance for the gradual development of a common Swedish orthography. Latin was still the dominant language in literature and academia in the 17th century, as was French in the 18th century. In addition, Finnish, Meänkieli and Sami have been spoken in the northern parts of Sweden for many hundreds of years (Ehrnebo 2003).

Swedish dominated in most areas of society from the 1800s onwards, and has remained the dominant language since then. Throughout the country, however, Swedish has of course been spoken within a wide-reaching dialect continuum. Despite this, the perception of the Swedish language as a single language has never been challenged in modern times.

The most debated language issues during recent centuries have been rules for spelling. In 1906, a spelling reform was carried out by the education minister at the time, which proposed the modernisation of spelling. Even though this and other reforms were widely discussed, the debates never turned into serious conflicts and the reforms were gradually accepted. Around the 1920s, the standard written norm of Swedish was more or less settled (Josephson in preparation).

3. Swedish in a minority context

However, the decision to establish Swedish as the principal language in law was not obvious or immediate, but rather the result of discussions emerging among Swedish policy makers during the 20-30 years preceding the language act.

Sweden joined the EU in 1995. The discussions preceding the accession placed Sweden and the Swedish language in a minority context in relation to the EU countries and the major European languages – mainly English. Sweden's accession to the EU seems to have created a greater consciousness of the role of Swedish language in national identity (Milani 2007).

Overall, globalisation and the growing importance of supranational bodies – as well as ambitious goals for internationalisation, for example within Swedish academia – placed the Swedish language in a new light within Swedish politics.

From the 1970s onwards immigration to Sweden increased, and from the 1990s many of the migrants were refugees with no knowledge of Swedish. The need for translation and interpretation within the public sector increased, as well as debates on how immigrants could learn Swedish in the most effective way. The focus on Sweden as a multilingual society also created a new role for the Swedish language as the common language in society. In debates among policy makers, access to Swedish was identified as a democratic issue (Spetz 2014).

The fact that Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani, Sami and Yiddish gained official status as national minority languages in Sweden from 2000 also drew attention to the fact that the Swedish language itself was lacking official status.

4. The road to legislative status

In 1997, the government gave the Swedish Language Board (later the Swedish Language Council) the task of drafting a proposal for a plan of action to promote the Swedish language. The plan, which was submitted the following year, outlined a main objective: to keep Swedish as a complete language used in all areas of society. The board also proposed that the status of Swedish should be regulated through law (Swedish Language Board 1998).

In 2000, the government appointed a parliamentary committee with the mission of putting forward an action plan for the Swedish language. The plan was

submitted in 2002 and also included a suggestion for a new language law (SOU 2002:27).

However, a government proposal was not put forward until 2005 (Prop. 2005/06:2). The bill excluded the proposal for a language act. Instead, parliament adopted four political objectives in respect of language:

- Swedish is the majority language in Sweden.
- Swedish should be a complete language, i.e. it should be possible to use it in all areas of society.
- The language of authorities should be correct, simple and understandable.
- Everyone has a right to language: to learn Swedish, to learn foreign languages, and to use one's mother tongue or minority language.

Only a few years later, in 2008, a new parliamentary committee was given the more concrete mission of drafting a proposal for a language act with the objective of establishing the status of the Swedish language in a national and international context. A bill was put forward the following year and was passed by parliament with broad political support. The Language Act came into force on July 1st, 2009.

4. Conclusion

Historically, the Swedish language has not played a crucial role in Swedish national identity in the way that language has in many other Nordic and European countries. Looking at the regulations on language use in the public sector, Swedish is only implied as the official language (Swedish Language Council 2016). Even today, it tends to be exceptions to the use of Swedish that are made explicit in laws and regulations, such as provisions for the right to translation and interpretation for immigrants. The absence of regulations regarding Swedish suggests that Swedes have taken the position of the national language for granted.

However, the decision to give legal status to one principal language may also have been more complicated for Sweden than for many other countries, given Sweden's strong ideological position on the preservation of diversity and multiculturalism. In such a context, establishing a linguistic hierarchy in the form of a language act could be perceived as a manifestation of the opposite position, i.e. giving a privileged position to one ethnic group over others (Milani 2007).

As well as a strong pluralistic ideology, Sweden has had a strong voice in international arenas defending human rights. This factor, together with the accession to the EU, opened the way for the acknowledgement of the five national minority languages and the rights of national minority groups to use, develop and have access to their languages. Another factor that the Swedish language law had to consider was the strong position of the English language in Sweden. The growing importance of English in Swedish society, in the cultural field as well as in

academia, together with a strong command of English within the population, has led scholars to suggest that English should be viewed as a second language in Sweden rather than a foreign language.

These factors have made Swedish language legislation complicated, but clearly not impossible. The Language Act of 2009 may be viewed as a compromise, a clash of ideological standpoints or a golden mean, depending on the perspective. However, it is clear that the compromise between the three pillars in the language act: the promotion of Swedish as a national language, the revitalisation of the national minority languages and the preservation of Sweden as a multilingual society will remain a major challenge for Swedish language policy.

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Bibliographical information

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