Does the Nordic Region Speak with a FORKED Tongue?

The Queen of Denmark,
the Government Minister and
others give their views on
the Nordic language community

KARIN ARVIDSSON

norden

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Nordic Council of Ministers

Ved Stranden 18

DK-1061 Copenhagen K

Phone (+45) 3396 0200

Nordic Council

Ved Stranden 18

DK-1061 Copenhagen K

Phone (+45) 3396 0400

www.norden.org

The Nordic Co-operation

Nordic co-operation is one of the world's most extensive forms of regional collaboration, involving Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland.

Nordic co-operation has firm traditions in politics, the economy, and culture. It plays an important role in European and international collaboration, and aims at creating a strong Nordic community in a strong Europe.

Nordic co-operation seeks to safeguard Nordic and regional interests and principles in the global community. Common Nordic values help the region solidify its position as one of the world's most innovative and competitive.

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PREFACE

The Queen of Denmark does it, the academic does it, the chat show host does it, and so does the ex-president. Together with a number of Nordic citizens from all parts of society, they talk about language – language that governs, language that changes, language that decays, and about the future of language. Language engages, language arouses emotions, language provokes. The reader is left in no doubt about that.

The aim of this book is to arouse reflection and stimulate debate. One thing is certain about language: everyone takes clear, personal and explicit positions, and shows a strong interest in the subject.

This Yearbook contains interviews with a number of language users and representatives of various views on language from the Nordic countries, active in widely contrasting social fields. From the Queen of Denmark to the editor-in-chief of a Swedish entertainment newspaper.

The decision to choose language as the focus of this year's edition of the Yearbook can easily be explained. The primary reason is accelerating globalisation, which is exerting a revolutionary, emotional and aesthetic influence on the human use of language. The modern lingua franca – English – has reached such a dominant position that it is increasingly suppressing national languages in a long succession of domains. This also applies to us in the Nordic collaboration.

But language is also about power. Nordic collaboration prioritises the Scandinavian languages. Icelanders and Finns have access to translated and interpreted material if they have not learned a Scandinavian language. How does the way we handle the language issue affect Nordic collaboration? Do Scandinavians have an advantage when they can work in their own languages? There are differing views about this. At the same time, there are political currents in Finland that, for example, are demanding the abolition of compulsory Swedish in schools.

The opinions expressed in the book are naturally those of the participants, but represent a broad spectrum and sometimes lie outside the official views of the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council.

The book shines a light on a Nordic region as seen through the prism of language. It is our hope that our enthusiasm will spread to readers of the book – whether they speak Greenlandic, Elfdalian or English.

Jan-Erik Enestam

Secretary General
Nordic Council

Halldór Ásgrímsson

Secretary General
Nordic Council of Ministers

LANGUAGES IN THE NORDIC REGION

Nordic languages are those that are traditionally spoken in the geographical area known as the Nordic region: Danish, Finnish, Faroese, Greenlandic, Icelandic, Norwegian, Sami and Swedish.

Scandinavian languages are a sub-group of the Germanic languages, and include the related languages of Danish, Faroese, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. Finnish, on the other hand, belongs to the Finno-Ugric language group, and Greenlandic is an Eskimo-Aleut language.

Official languages are the language(s) that a country has decided will be used in public administration.

In Sweden, Swedish is defined as the principal language, while there are five official minority languages subject to particular regulations: Finnish, Meänkieli (Torne Valley Finnish), Yiddish, Romani Chib and Sami.

Denmark has Danish as its official language but in Southern Jutland German is a national minority language. On the Faroe Islands, both Faroese and Danish are official languages, but Faroese is the statutory principal language. Greenlandic is the official language in Greenland and has its own linguistic law.

Norway has Norwegian in two forms: Bokmål and Nynorsk. In addition, Sami, Kven, Romany and Romanes have official status as minority languages.

In Finland, Finnish and Swedish are the country's two national languages. On Åland Swedish is the only official language. Sami also has official status in certain regions in northern Finland.

In Iceland, Icelandic is the only official language.

In addition, national sign languages are acknowledged as minority languages in all the Nordic countries, with the exception of Denmark.

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
The sense of the world must lie outside the world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Political map steers Nordic language development

By FREDRIK LINDSTRÖM

In 1997, a Danish woman left her one-year-old child in a buggy outside a bar in New York and went in for a drink. The police were called, the mother was arrested for 'child neglect', the child was taken into care, and a legal process initiated. A similar thing happened a few years later involving a Swedish woman in the USA and, in both cases, the women claimed this was completely normal behaviour in their home countries – something that the American authorities found totally improbable to begin with.

14 THESE EVENTS CAN NATURALLY BE SEEN AS AN ILLUSTRATION of cultural differences in the world, but have also been taken as a measure of social trust that, not without some justification, is regarded as characteristic of Scandinavians. There are only a few countries in the world where a majority of people say they trust each other, and these include the Nordic countries. We then touch upon what is often called 'the Nordic model', i.e. the basic values of Nordic society and the reason why Nordic countries are so often near the top in various statistics concerning welfare.

I am convinced that language develops in *response* to developments in society, rather than *causing* these developments. This is why I am interested in the significance of the Nordic social model in this context. How are we influenced by the world seeing some kind of Nordic mentality in us? Would we benefit from turning inwards towards each other, and would this benefit our language community? And how should we really interpret our similarities – and our differences?

The Nordic model is often described as a kind of universal welfare state with strong emphasis on human rights and equality. The purpose of the state is to guarantee free individuals the right to self-fulfilment. This 'state individualism' requires a smooth-running public sector that provides a large range of social safety nets to catch people who do not wholly reach this objective. Welfare services are not seen as a help to poor and needy people, but as a right that applies to all citizens.

The Nordic region is peripheral in Europe. The region, not least linguistically and culturally, can be seen in many ways as being less integrated in the Christian European unit that developed from the Middle Ages onwards. For example, the Nordic countries are the only ones to have retained a traditional pre-Christian name for the major festival of the year, Christmas – the rest of Europe uses names that refer to the birth of Christ. Distinctive Nordic features

that crop up now and again need not be perceived as something 'original' with some romantic overtones, but rather a simple reality caused by our geographically peripheral location. A community of exclusion, if you like. And what is a defect in one epoch can suddenly be an attractive advantage in the next. Today, Christmas has become a commercial family celebration, and other languages are desperately seeking after a neutral, non-religious word for the mid-winter celebration – and, look, the Nordic countries already have one! Antiquity that appears modern.

This gives us one picture of Nordic conditions, and there are certainly many similar ones. Another example is that Nordic languages were the first to incorporate new informality in the 1960s by using the informal version of 'you' and the greeting 'hi'. And this need not be explained as a kind of 'modern' thinking – many Nordic regions had simply not had time to incorporate French formalities with titles and such like. Quite simply, we are perhaps not as 'Europeanised' into the Christian, formal and family-based culture as other countries in the West – and this is now to our advantage when this very culture is increasingly brought into question. Perhaps we are simply the first to depart from the old-fashioned ways because we arrived last!

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“The Nordic region is peripheral in Europe, which can be seen in many ways, not least linguistically and culturally.”

Maybe this is related to our individualism and confidence in our social structure – it links to a train of thought that we never had time to dispense with. And our equality in the Nordic region should not be surprising – many of our differences are created deliberately. This also applies to language to a certain extent.

If we are to discuss our Nordic languages, we must first remind ourselves that the entire concept of language in the conventional sense of 'national language' is a political term rather than a linguistic one. It can be illustrated by a simple example; the Swedish Elfdalian dialect is much more different from Swedish than the Norwegian language is. Yet Elfdalian is formally a Swedish dialect and not a language, whilst Norwegian, easier for a Swede to understand, is a foreign language. Why?

The answer is political. A common description is that a dialect with its own army is a language, a language without an army is a dialect. To a certain extent, the Swedish and Norwegian languages are politically-created concepts – and it is still doubtful whether there are sufficient differences for them to be defined as

two separate languages in a linguistic sense. We assume that languages like *Danish*, *Norwegian* and *Swedish* are separate entities, and that they would have existed even if history had taken a different course (or maybe just been slightly different). But it is important not to assume anything here, and certainly not that the Nordic countries are some pre-determined units. We should simply remind ourselves that, like Finland, Norway and Iceland did not become independent states until the 20th century.

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Many alternative Nordic political maps are imaginable – and all of them could naturally have affected language. The dialects of Bohuslän and Värmland could easily have been Norwegian dialects, and those in Småland or Västgötaland could have been Danish. Not to mention the dialect in Skåne, which linguistically is actually a Danish dialect, but in a political sense has been Swedish for more than 350 years. And the Gotland dialect would have been regarded as a separate language if the island of Gotland had become independent. What would have been a country with its own language in an alternative historical scenario is today just a municipality with its own dialect.

Our entire perception of the concept of *language* is deeply entangled with our perception of nation states as the natural units into which the land areas of the earth are divided. In pre-Christian times, it was the *empire* that was the superior form of power, such as the Dana Empire or the Svea Empire; these were geographically vague areas with no central power and where actual governance was maintained through violence, plundering and protective taxes – not unlike today's protection rackets. For this type of power, it is more or less irrelevant which language the subjects speak as long as they obey and pay their taxes.

But for the clearly-defined state, it is different. The central power must have a communication tool in order to hold the country together and administer – quite simply, the state and its citizens must be able to understand each other. This is the practical reason behind the idea 'one country – one language'. But there is another reason, one that is rather rhetorical and concerns a type of pseudo-logical proof. According to this, the Swedish language can be said to have developed partly in order to prove that we are Swedes – a kind of circular argument of the higher school, but one that has had political significance.

From a continental perspective, all Nordic languages were originally regarded as 'Danish'. The Icelander Snorre Sturlasson realised in the 13th century that he was writing in Danish! For a long time, there was only one other Nordic language that fought to prove and justify its existence beside Danish, and that

was Swedish. The term *Swedish* stumbled through the Middle Ages, naturally a direct reflection of the political situation, where the Swedish kingdom often fought for independence from the Danish. In the 17th century, it can be seen how Swedish language norms strove to create differences between the languages; the increasingly consistent ending of Swedish words with the letter 'a', as in for example *tala* and *piga*, rarely occurs in Swedish dialects, but later became distinctive of Swedish in contrast to the Danish endings of 'e' as in *tale* and *pige*. Similar examples could be taken from the Norwegian of the 19th century, when it finally broke free from Danish.

The movement away from Danish is given, because all Nordic languages are spin-offs from it. The burden of proof has lain with the various ethnic groups that have chosen to assert some sort of independence; their task was to show that their language was not Danish. Many of the differences between national languages are deliberate, because we have needed differences to convince ourselves of the authority of the nation state.

In Norway there are two official versions of Norwegian. Anyone analysing this from a strictly political perspective could be tempted to draw the conclusion that Bokmål did not really succeed in distinguishing itself sufficiently from Danish, and so was supplemented with another, more distinct, Norwegian language type. Together, they fulfil, in their separate ways, the two bearing functions of a national language: Bokmål for actual communication, Nynorsk rather for identification.

The identity of a country is weakened without a national language, and perhaps the state authority is also weakened as a result. *Sweden* is a country where *Swedes* live who speak *Swedish*. The more convinced we are of that, the better the chances of building up a strong state structure – the magnet that holds these Swedes together. Strong states and the relatively trusting relationship that their citizens have to them and each other are thought to be an important key to the successful Nordic model. Somewhat simplified, we have consciously differentiated ourselves in order to form nation states – which hardly surprisingly still display great similarities in an international perspective. But perhaps this has been necessary in order to build up trust between the state and the individual.

Language also reflects more or less unconscious political changes. For example, I am convinced that Danish and Swedish, which are the two Scandinavian languages whose mutual understanding is worst, have separated in the past two centuries largely because of social developments.

The victory of the Swedish middle class led to the development of a Standard Swedish that is largely based on the language spoken by the previously so despised newly-rich Swedes, who pronounce the words as they are spelt. This has driven Swedish pronunciation in a literal direction, while Danish, like many other national languages, continues to build upon the spoken language of the social elite. As Swedish has become increasingly a spoken written language, this has naturally made Danish, a more traditional spoken language, ever more difficult to understand. According to various surveys, Swedes find it somewhat harder to understand Danish than vice versa.

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The importance of the dominance of Copenhagen within Denmark should not be underestimated either. The dominance is so great that the dialect spoken in Copenhagen has, in reality, become Standard Danish, while Swedes speak more as if they are reading the words. This is an example of how linguistic differences that have arisen during later generations match standard perceptions of our stereotypical differences – the relaxed Danes and the somewhat rigid and bureaucratic Swedes. So language does not shape reality in this case either, but it can help to confirm pre-existing perceptions.

Language disintegration in the Nordic region is therefore both 'organic' and to a certain extent created for political purposes, and underlines perceptions of our differences – particularly when it is differences we are seeking. When the focus turns to our similarities, it often seems to be a response to some form of threat in the background. I do not believe it is a coincidence that Nordic progress towards unity reached a climax during the second half of the 19th century, with the major Nordic Orthography Congress in 1869 as a clear milestone. It was during the Romantic period when the tendency was to look back, but that is far from the whole explanation. Scandinavianism must also be seen as a consequence of both Sweden and Denmark weakening as states.

Sweden had lost Finland as early as 1809, and Denmark, after long periods of unrest, was finally forced to give up the southernmost part of Jutland (Schleswig-Holstein) to Prussia in 1864. The Nordic Orthography Congress in 1869 was held during a period of vulnerability and change, immediately after the disastrous years in the 1860s when poverty was rife, emigration had started to accelerate, and the revolutions of the burgeoning industrial society were starting to flex their muscles. In such periods, notions of a magnificent common past and notions of an invaluable language and cultural heritage are inevitable.

It is clear that interest in Scandinavianism and a language community cooled as uncertainty decreased and the welfare society started to take shape. Not least in Sweden, which was perhaps first out of the traps; the Orthographic Reform of 1906 represented an immediate step away from the Nordic linguistic affiliation. In my view it is symptomatic that the most important reform in the pan-Nordic direction in the entire 20th century – i.e. the introduction of the letter 'å' and lower case for nouns in both Danish and Norwegian – came in the wake of the Second World War and the vulnerability the Nordic region felt at that time. However, both the reform and that period appear to be somewhat incidental in the wider context. We only appear to collaborate when we really need one another, or when we are afraid. And why should that be surprising?

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“It is clear that interest in Scandinavianism and a language community cooled as uncertainty decreased and the budding welfare society started to grow.”

Today, the Nordic countries, like their citizens, come across as successful individualists. They have become winners – and winners look after themselves because part of their success is bound up with making themselves independent of their surroundings. The standard of living in the Nordic countries is one of the highest in the world, both in terms of material values and health as well as individual freedom.

There are countless examples of the dominance of Nordic countries in international statistics of success. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden regularly feature near the top of tables of measurable welfare factors. All of them are in the top ten in terms of happiness experienced, and Denmark is number one. According to the Gini Coefficient, which measures distribution of incomes within a country, Sweden and Denmark are the world's most economically equal countries, and Norway and Finland are fifth and eighth respectively. When *Newsweek* ranks the best countries in the world to live in, virtually all the Nordic countries appear near the top, and Norway, Sweden and Finland have each led the table in recent years.

We can go on: Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland occupy four of the top six positions in the Corruption Perception Index produced by Transparency International, an independent organisation that monitors corruption, and Iceland is not far behind the other Nordic countries. As confirmed by

Save the Children, the world's best country in which to be a mother is Norway, followed by Iceland and Sweden.

But the interesting thing here is that our – at least on paper – successful state structures display such a lot of common features. In the eyes of the world, our partly fabricated national boundaries are certainly quite insignificant. Many perceive 'Scandinavia' as a single unit, and it could just as easily be a single country. The world is now seeing something desirable and valuable in 'Scandinavia' and its social model – or to use modern terminology, its strong brand – and everyone will want to be part of it. And this will be reflected in language.

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Without doubt, this is also the most important long-term incentive for greater collaboration in the Nordic region – culturally, politically, economically... and thereby also linguistically. What road do we choose here? Now that trust and the strong states have been built up, we no longer need to try to create linguistic differences and we can converge for practical reasons. The new Öresund letter *ö*, a combination of the Swedish '*ö*' and the Danish '*ø*', is a perfect practical example of how simple this can be. But this should not entail a conscious battle against English, because a Nordic language community that is, in some way, forced is worthless. It can only develop if we have a real desire to collaborate with one another and can benefit from it.

The key can very well lie in how, in the long term, we handle being looked upon as a role model – and in understanding just how volatile such a status can be. Anyone who knows their history knows that the success story of the Nordic countries is unique, that we have gone from poverty and misery to world-leading welfare states in just a few generations. It can also be useful to bear in mind that part of our modernity is perhaps only illusory, and reiterate that a strength in one epoch can become a weakness in another. Not least, we must see through the illusion that the successes of the Nordic countries are something that each country created separately. This can generate some humility, which is not only becoming but also very constructive.

In team sports, it is often said that a team is never as vulnerable as in the immediate period of exhilaration after scoring a goal. Teams that are aware of this weakness are those that are really successful. Awareness of vulnerability is perhaps the ultimate strength – in it lies the grounds for all unity.

He who does not understand a joke, he does not
understand Danish.

Georg Brandes

He who does not understand seriousness, he does not
understand Swedish.

Gustaf af Geijerstam

“Right language in the right place” – QUEEN MARGRETHE II of Denmark a strong protector of Nordic culture

QUEEN MARGRETHE II receives us in her beautiful library at Amalienborg Palace in Copenhagen. Surrounded by world literature and art books, she talks about her close relationship to language and literature. The Queen is deeply and personally involved in many areas of culture, she reads a lot, and is a frequent visitor to Det Kongelige Teater, the Royal Danish Theatre. She talks enthusiastically and knowledgeably about language issues, in perfect Swedish with no accent. However, she does not regard Swedish as her native language, which is Danish. She can also speak English, French and German. In 1989, the Queen was awarded the annual prize of the Danish Native Language Society (Modersmål-Selskabet).

Margrethe has been Queen of Denmark for 40 years. The royal motto is: God's help, the people's love, Denmark's strength. The Queen's popularity in Denmark is firmly rooted and solid as a rock. She sees preserving Nordic languages and strengthening Nordic collaboration as perfectly natural.

24 “LANGUAGE IS A WAY OF GETTING CLOSER TO PEOPLE. And for people migrating from other countries, language is the key to integration. If you want to become part of the country in which you live, you must learn the language properly. If you don’t learn the language, you will never be anything other than a stranger. It is important for children also. Language gives us access to the environment, the country and the people around us, and we can communicate with one another,” says the Queen.

Queen Margrethe has a deep-rooted and optimistic view of the ability of language to serve as a tool for communication and to provide a link between people. Despite, or perhaps because of, her position as queen, she disagrees with theories which claim that language is primarily a tool for exercising power. This deliberately positive position derives from Margrethe’s unusually rich and broad engagement for language and language issues. The foundation for this commitment was already laid in childhood, and was partly a direct consequence of her multilingual background.

The Danish, Norwegian and Swedish royal courts are closely linked. Inter-Nordic marriages have taken place and close family relationships have developed between the courts. The Swedish King, Carl XVI Gustaf, and the Danish Queen are cousins, and spent their childhood summers together. The Queen’s mother, Queen Ingrid, was daughter of the Swedish king, Gustaf VI Adolf, and his British-born first wife, Princess Margaret. Ingrid married the Danish prince and subsequent king, Fredrik IX, in 1935.

“My mother was bilingual, speaking English and Swedish, and as soon as she got married she learned Danish,” says Queen Margrethe. “She spoke Danish very well, but naturally she had an accent. My father thought her accent was charming! People sometimes said that I picked up the same accent as my mother.”

The young Danish and Swedish princesses – the Haga princesses – used to spend their summers at Sofiero Palace, Gustaf VI Adolf's summer residence outside Helsingborg. The cousins from Denmark and Sweden played in the beautiful palace park with its view over the Öresund Sound to Denmark. The Queen has a memory from the summer of 1943, before the intensifying German occupation made the visits impossible.

"I was just over three-years-old and only have vague memories of my mother Ingrid and I visiting my cousins on the other side of the Sound," explains the Queen. "I understood what my cousins said, but they didn't understand me. As we were driving home – my mother always drove the car – we were passing along Strandvejen on the way to Copenhagen, and I remember asking her to teach me Swedish so that my cousins could understand what I said."

The Queen's mother then started reading Elsa Beskow's books to Margrethe, and also spoke Swedish with her when the opportunity arose. Margrethe was usually looked after by Danish nannies, so there were few opportunities to practice Swedish. The Queen remembers enjoying speaking Swedish, pronouncing familiar words in a different way.

When the war ended in 1945, summer holidays in Sweden resumed, and Margrethe got the chance to practice her Swedish. In the summer of 1948, her younger sister Benedikte became ill. Their Danish nanny spent a lot of time at the hospital with Benedikte, so Margrethe had more time with her mother and was able to speak Swedish. It was then that she really got to grips with the Swedish language and could speak it unhindered with other Swedish-speaking children with whom the family socialised.

When Margrethe was around ten or eleven, she, like other Danish children, started to learn Swedish in school.

"This was a bit difficult," remembers the Queen. The teacher's Swedish was not really like the Swedish she was used to.

"I knew that I shouldn't contradict the teacher, but her pronunciation was different to that of my mother. But when it was my turn to read out loud in class, I simply read in my way." Her sisters also learned Swedish. Princess Benedikte, married to a German prince, and Princess Anne-Marie, married to the previous Greek monarch, both speak excellent Swedish.

Queen Margrethe, like her grandfather, the Swedish King Gustaf VI Adolf, had a very active interest in archaeology. She accompanied her grandfather to Italy where they took part in excavations of Etruscan remains carried out by Swedish archaeologists. Here, as a teenager, she learned 'adult' Swedish; the ability to talk about serious subjects and use scientific terms beyond the limitations of everyday speech. Today, the Queen feels that her Swedish stuck at the level she learned in the 1960s. However, this must be regarded as a truth with modification.

26 "I believe one should be careful about cutting down on Swedish in Finland."

"The Nordic languages have very different intonations," says Margrethe. "There are, for example, completely different sounds in Swedish and Danish. In particular, this applies to the modulation, which by the way was already pointed out by my mother. Swedish has a very high pitch, Swedish voices are up in the treble, while Danes are closer to the bass tones. In addition, Swedish goes up and down like a roller coaster, while Danish is more stable. Other differences include pronunciation of various letters."

"The Danes rasp the letter 'r' in their throats, if they bother to pronounce it at all," says Margrethe. "The letter 'r' is never rolled along the tongue in Danish, apart from in a few dialects. Other sounds that Swedes pronounce completely differently are the letter 'u' which is more like an 'o' in Danish. But the most difficult thing for Danes who want to speak good Swedish is of course the Swedish 'sje' sound. Not many Danes can manage the old Swedish saying: '*Försök sköta sjuhundrasjuttiosju sjösjuka sjuksköterskor på sjön!*' My Swedish background has actually spread to the other members of the Danish royal family, who pronounce the 'sje' sound a little differently to most Danes," says the Queen.

"Another problem is that the same word in Swedish, Norwegian and Danish can have very different meanings. In Swedish, the word *rar* means kind or rare, while in Danish it means friendly or pleasant, and in Norwegian it means that someone is a bit strange. That's why, to be on the safe side, I'm careful not to use the word when I visit Norway," smiles the Queen.

Norway is otherwise one of her favourite destinations, and she is a close friend of Queen Sonja. They often go walking and skiing together in the Norwegian mountains. What language does the Queen speak in Norway?

Norwegian Bokmål and Danish are quite similar in written form, but the pronunciation is different. Queen Margrethe solves the problem by speaking an adapted version of Danish.

"Danish is fine, as long as I'm careful to say *femti* and *seksti* instead of *halvtreds* and *tres*," laughs the Queen and describes animatedly the confused looks that appear when she uses the Danish words for fifty and sixty, which are difficult to understand. She also wonders whether the Norwegian language has perhaps affected her Swedish, which is slightly tinged by Norwegian.

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When Queen Margrethe was born on 16 April 1940 – just a few days after the German occupation of Denmark started – Iceland was still part of the Danish kingdom. The Queen was therefore also given an Icelandic Christian name, Þórhildur. This does not mean she can speak Icelandic, but she has read and is fascinated by Old Icelandic literature translated into Danish. She has learned some Faroese and whenever she is on an official visits to the country, she always holds a small part of her speeches in Faroese.

The Queen is protector of Nordic collaboration, and she is very keen for close contact between the countries to continue. She feels that language plays a key role in this.

"We Danes are sloppy with our pronunciation, and so are the Swedes, which make it difficult for us to understand each other". It really is fantastic that we can understand each other, she feels, and praises the immense richness of being able to speak your own language, instead of having to revert to a foreign language. She also touches on the subject of the special situation in Finland, where fewer children are learning Swedish in school.

"Swedish gives Finland access to the rest of the Nordic countries. I believe one should be careful about cutting down on Swedish in Finland," says the Queen.

She completely rejects the use of English in contact between Nordic countries. "I'd see it as a failure if we start to use English in contacts between the Nordic countries.

"Right language in the right place," insists the Queen. "English is very important, but it has no place in Nordic collaboration. I feel that we incorporate imported English words too easily in Nordic languages. And Sweden was quick off the mark there", says the Queen, remembering that the English word 'tape'

was incorporated as *tejp* and *att tejpa* much earlier in Sweden than in Denmark.

There is great consensus that language is a bearer of both identity and culture. But does this mean that the Queen feels different when she is speaking Swedish compared with Danish?

28 "Perhaps a little, it's a different way," she answers. "For example, there are linguistic differences in the way people are addressed. When I was a child learning Swedish, I was never allowed to say 'you' to an older person as we did in Denmark. Instead of saying "Would you like more coffee?" in Swedish we said "Would Miss Karlsson like more coffee?". It felt strange for me as a 15- or 16-year-old, but I was corrected by my mother if I used 'you'. It was not even permitted when I spoke to my grandfather, the Swedish King. He always had to be addressed in the third person as 'grandfather'," remembers Margrethe.

"Then of course there are differences that mean that a translated word becomes something different: *lingon* (lingonberry) becomes *tyttebær* in Danish – it sounded and tasted like a completely different berry!"

The Queen's background, but also her current everyday life, is characterised by a multilingual environment. Her husband, Prince Henrik, is French. Her two sons, Crown Prince Frederik and Prince Joakim, have wives born in Australia and France respectively.

"Sometimes we mix the languages in one big melting pot," laughs the Queen. "My husband is French and we usually speak Danish at home. The Prince Consort understands Swedish, and pointed out at an early stage that Swedish is easier to understand – they pronounce most of what they want to say!"

The Queen and her siblings in the Danish royal family were virtually trilingual even as children. Because Queen Ingrid had two native languages, Swedish and English, and King Frederik IX was Danish, the Queen learned English and Danish as native languages and later learned a third native language – even if the Queen prefers not to call it that – when she learned Swedish in childhood.

Her son, Crown Prince Frederik, does not speak perfect Swedish, but has the ability to adapt the Danish language to a level understandable to a Swede. He showed this not least when he was interviewed on TV earlier this year, exhausted after completing the Swedish ski race, Vasaloppet.

Otherwise, Swedish does not play a big role in the Queen's everyday life. But if she reads a book by a Swedish author, she prefers to read it in the original language, not a translation. She loves cultured language.

"Well-written Swedish is grandiose, but is perhaps less common today," she says, while also extolling the elegance in a well-formulated Swedish speech. In particular, the Queen appreciates Finland Swedish with its elegant twists of a sometimes rather old-fashioned style.

Queen Margrethe's language skills are striking, which she mostly attributes to natural aptitude. All three members of her sibling group – she herself, Benedikte and Anne-Marie – have found it easy to learn languages. If she were to give some general advice for learning a language, it would be to spend as much time as possible with people speaking that language. Naturally, the earlier we come into contact with a language, the easier it is to learn it.

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"If you don't learn the language, you will never be anything other than a stranger."

However, speaking and reading a language perfectly does not always mean that you can write it. The Queen does not feel that she is as accomplished in written Swedish as she is in the spoken language, but she was given some training in childhood.

"At Christmas we received presents from the royal family in Stockholm, and we had to write thank-you letters. That gave us practice in writing Swedish. I quickly learned to write 'thank you' the Swedish way (*tack*) and not the Danish way (*tak*). It wouldn't make sense otherwise."

Her interest in language has led to a number of projects as a translator, from Danish to both Swedish and French. Together with her husband, she has translated Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*. She likes the rich tones in the French language, as well as the grammar and the clause structures that are more refined. The difficulty when translating from French to Danish is to maintain the content without directly transferring the more complicated French linguistic structure.

"A lot has to be changed when expressing the same message. Another problem was that *All Men Are Mortal* is a historical novel set in a period stretching from

the 13th century up to the middle of the 20th century, and Simone de Beauvoir uses various language styles typical of the various epochs she is describing.

It was a demanding but exciting challenge to try to find the equivalent in Danish that would work.”

She describes poetry as the most difficult to translate.

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“A translation of a novel is one thing, but in poetry much is lost in translation,” she observes. However, Queen Margrethe praises the poetic Swedish that she feels is so beautifully billowing. She herself has translated French poetry – she has translated her husband’s poems to Danish.

“It is incredibly interesting to investigate a language and to try to transfer that little bit extra that the Prince Consort wants to say in Danish.”

Margrethe has also translated Stig Strömholm’s trilogy *The Valley, The Fields* and *The Forest*, which is set in the French kingdom of the 5th century. When she read the novels, she felt they were so captivating and beautiful that she wanted to translate them. So she contacted Stig Strömholm who was then professor of law at Uppsala University.

“A fascinating project and you learn, not least, a lot about your own language when you translate,” says the Queen. She talks about the importance of literature for culture and language, and when you talk about Danish sooner or later you come to Hans Christian Andersen. Margrethe really appreciates his well-formulated and, superficially, simple sentence structures, which however often contain many deep subtexts.

“He has such a poetic language. So full of friendly irony and gentle humour, but sometimes it is also a bit sharper. His stories have had great importance for the language development of Danish children. The Danish language would not be as it is today were it not for these stories. In his time, many people thought that his language was far too popular,” observes Margrethe. “Some people even felt it lacked literary qualities, because his writing was so much like spoken language. And although his language has become rather outdated today, it still has a positive effect on Danish.”

In addition to her linguistic aptitude, Queen Margrethe is also very interested in painting and other forms of art. She devotes every Thursday afternoon to

painting, and has held several exhibitions. She has even designed sets for the Royal Theatre.

“We can’t live without expressing ourselves in all the ways we have access to. Even when we are talking, we are also expressing ourselves with our bodies – we gesticulate. You can also express yourself through colour, music, song and dance. But nevertheless, without language you get nowhere,” observes the Queen.

Languages have played, and continue to play, one of the key roles in Margrethe’s life, and her delight in discussing language is unmissable. However, she also points out several times during the interview that she perhaps has an old-fashioned view of language, and she is not always pleased about how Nordic languages are treated in schools today. Margrethe thinks back to her own childhood; during her teens, she had both Swedish and Norwegian reading books in school. She was a keen reader of Swedish classics by authors such as Selma Lagerlöf and Esaias Tegnér. The Queen looks a little reflective.

But then she spontaneously quotes the Swedish romantic poet Erik Gustaf Geijer: “This flaming heart, it beats so fast...”

“We think we understand each other, but we don’t” – ‘Swegian’ and SKAVLAN

The Norwegian journalist, FREDRIK SKAVLAN, has been making programmes for Norwegian television for 15 years. For some years now, his programme has also been shown on Swedish television and is very popular. His chat show is watched by the biggest television audience in the Nordic countries, three million viewers. He ensures that everyone understands the language by speaking ‘Swegian’, a mixture of Swedish and Norwegian. This has caused uproar among some language purists in Norway.

But for Fredrik Skavlan the language used is not what is most important. The main point is that we understand each other, and he is prepared to go to great lengths to ensure this. He feels that we can forget Nordic collaboration if we fight against the use of English, and if we are to use our native languages at all, we must adapt them so that everyone can understand – Danish pronunciation must be modified, Norwegian must be slowed down, and Swedish must be made clearer with a carefully chosen pan-Nordic vocabulary. Not until then can we deepen Nordic collaboration.

34 “IT’S A SAD TRUTH THAT, UNLESS WE ADAPT, we simply cannot understand each other’s language. We think we understand each other, but we don’t. Politically this is a difficult issue.”

Fredrik Skavlan has personal experience of this when, in the TV studio, he was suddenly faced with the challenge of making himself understood not just in Norwegian, but also in Swedish. His popular chat show was to be exported to Sweden.

However, he solved the problem. By talking Swegian.

“It was a challenge for Norwegians to hear me sitting there talking Swegian. Their chat show host, who they knew so well through the years, was now suddenly talking a language that was not pure Norwegian,” says Skavlan. “Suddenly, Norwegians had to tolerate that I sat there in the TV studio, adulterating my language.”

Swegian is a blended cocktail of a language that Skavlan used to ensure mutual linguistic understanding. The response after the first programme was somewhat mixed. Most Norwegians understood and accepted that Skavlan was forced to speak Swegian. They perhaps had their own experiences of trying to communicate with Swedes. But some Norwegians were very negative, citing linguistic destruction and poor use of the Norwegian language. This was in contrast to the Swedes, who were delighted – they thought they had become really clever because they could understand Norwegian.

Fredrik Skavlan is now Skavlan for both the Norwegian and the Swedish populations. His face is very well known in both countries, and his chat show is watched every week in millions of homes. How did he hit upon the strange idea of making TV programmes in Sweden without speaking Swedish?

"It was really three things: my love for a certain Swedish actress, Norway's economic success and pure chance."

The most important coincidence was that, in 2005, Sweden and Norway celebrated the centenary of the dissolution of the union. Fredrik proposed to Norwegian TV that he should make a special programme from Stockholm, featuring the Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik and his Swedish counterpart Göran Persson. He got his wish, and the programme was shown on both Norwegian and Swedish TV.

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"Perhaps it was because Maria Bonnevie was in the audience that made me really want to go to Sweden – that's what my producer says anyway," laughs Fredrik. In any case, the programme was a great success, and SVT asked for more episodes of Fredrik's chat show. His programme was scheduled on Friday evenings at prime time viewing.

Prime time television in Norwegian in Sweden!?

"Oh yes! The initiative could not have been more successful and, today, 'Skavlan' is shown in a single version, on both Swedish and Norwegian TV."

According to Fredrik, there was another factor that was very significant to the success of the Skavlan programme – over a million viewers already on the first evening in Sweden – the growth in the Norwegian economy. In 2009 figures were published showing that the Norwegian economy had grown larger than Sweden's. Swedes could no longer look upon Norway as a younger brother – possibly a younger brother who had grown up and become big and strong. And rich. The shift in the balance of power between Sweden and Norway has made the Swedes more open in their relation to Norway. Fredrik explains in a mixture of Swedish and English that the timing was lucky for the chat show. And today Skavlan is the only major entertainment programme that is produced on a pan-Nordic basis.

With his background as a journalist, Fredrik felt he needed to very carefully consider his language and his use of language. It would be very easy to go astray in the Norwegian-Swedish language labyrinths and end up with a language that was both pointless and difficult to understand.

"I realised that I had a very unsentimental relationship to language," he explains. "Language has one primary function – it allows us to communicate

with one another. In my job, I have to be able to communicate – not just with my TV viewers, but also with my Swedish staff, with the Swedish studio audience and, of course, with the guests on the programme.”

“So, for me, language is communication, and if we are to understand each other, we all have to be able to compromise,” says Fredrik. Language is constantly developing, and he does not believe that Nordic people will suddenly abandon their native languages and start talking English.

36 “The understanding part is all-important for me – the actual language we use is irrelevant.”

“No, it’s through compromises that our languages develop,” he says. “The fact that we speak differently today than we did three hundred years ago is due to modification and adaptation. It’s totally natural that, in a time of modern media and where national boundaries are softening, we will compromise more in our use of language,” believes Fredrik. “If we are to find a common ‘Scandinavian-ness’, or why not a ‘Nordic-ness’, then we must be able to compromise with our languages.”

Fredrik takes our interview as an example. He talks Swegian so that we can more easily understand each other. Naturally, he could insist on using pure Norwegian, but then he would be frightened that our communication would break down and I would sit there with a blank look and a silly smile on my face. The same applies in the studio where he bypasses the difficult words that are not common to the languages, and uses linguistic metaphors and references that everyone can understand. For example, he would not say that someone works in REMA 1000 without explaining that it is the Norwegian equivalent of ICA.

Humour is always difficult. The Norwegian guests can make funny remarks, but the Swedes miss the joke if they do not understand the punchline because of language difficulties. And vice versa of course.

“Much of our humour is purely linguistic. Aren’t we always playing with intonation and meanings of words? It’s always a challenge not to fall flat on your face when trying to get humour across in Swegian.”

One continual debate is about whether to show the programme with sub-titles. Much of the Swedish and Norwegian audiences feel this is unnecessary. They feel they can understand each other without translation.

"But I'm in favour of sub-titles," says Fredrik. "For the same reason that I speak Swegian, I want sub-titles because they improve communication and understanding. I know that we don't understand each other sufficiently well – I could give you a thousand examples. I want to do everything in my power to ensure good understanding. The understanding part is all-important for me – the actual language we use is irrelevant. And prestige has no place in the use of language. If we allow prestige into our languages, we will be very lonely people."

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However, Fredrik does not feel that everyone should speak a mixed Scandinavian language. He simply means that we must use all the tools available that help us understand each other really well: interpretation, translation, sub-titles and mixing of languages.

There are Nordic people who can talk a mixed Scandinavian language that all Scandinavian countries can understand. Fredrik names the Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen who was a guest on the programme. Ari Behn, who is married to the Norwegian princess Märta Louise, has spoken fluent Swedish on Skavlan to the irritation of many Norwegians. But prestige can destroy the contact between countries, according to Fredrik.

"My programme is probably the only chat show in the world that tries to make language unimportant. Language must not steer the choice of guests – the best guests must be chosen, regardless of language," says Fredrik. "If I have a guest who speaks Italian or German, then we interpret using earpieces, but if we have an English-speaker on the programme, we all switch to English, which feels natural. 'Broken English' is a great asset."

"The same applies to our communication with Danes," underlines Fredrik. He argues that we must accept that Danish is difficult to understand, and that we must sometimes switch to English to communicate, just as he does in his programmes. When Lone Frank – a famous Danish science journalist – was a guest on the programme, all the Nordic participants spoke English.

"If we fight the use of English and see it as a threat and not as a tool, then we have problems. It's not a threat to our nationality, sense of language or identity.

If we work against English, then we can forget all Nordic collaboration,” says Fredrik. “It doesn’t just apply to the difficulties with Danish; it applies even more so with Finnish and Icelandic, which for most other Nordic people are completely incomprehensible languages.”

Fredrik wants me to disregard the language he is speaking in the interview, and sometimes changes more words than necessary.

38 “The little integrity I have left,” he laughs, “is that I have kept my Norwegian intonation. That was perhaps why Norwegians finally accepted that I speak Swegian,” suggests Fredrik. “Or it may be because we Norwegians have always had a generous attitude to different dialects, and in Norway dialects vary greatly. Now even with Swegian.”

“If we allow prestige into our languages, we will be very lonely people.”

Why does he think that the Skavlan programme is the only example of an inter-Nordic entertainment programme? His response provides food for thought.

“We don’t make a big thing out of language – it’s not the language that is most important,” says Skavlan. He reveals that he receives countless invitations to speak at various Norwegian-Swedish meetings, but that he always politely turns down the requests.

“My project is based on the premise that people should forget that I’m a Norwegian in Sweden,” says Fredrik. “I also want Norwegians to forget that I blend Swedish into my Norwegian language. They should just feel that I am one of them, regardless of language.”

He is also careful to emphasise that the Skavlan programme with its three million viewers does not aim to be some sort of language project, or even to promote Nordic political collaboration. His ambition is no more than to make good public-service television. If the programme then has a side-effect of challenging and enriching our identity and language affiliation, he feels that is a bonus.

But what about the sibling affiliation between Sweden and Norway?

"Yes, it's perhaps not always there in everyday life," says Fredrik. "But when we meet on a beach in Thailand – then we're sister nations. And the solidarity really comes out when we are hit by disasters like the one at Utøya last summer. Then we all had an extremely strong sense of being Scandinavian."

He refers to the island in Sweden where he spends his summers, where all the flags were at half-mast and where people felt part of the national grief that hit Norway. "That shows a natural affiliation without political coercion from above," he says.

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Will the Skavlan programme with its large audiences affect the use of language in Norway and Sweden? It's not unthinkable, according to Fredrik.

"Our programme is perhaps part of a bigger trend. Words that are most difficult to understand are being replaced and in the long term the most dramatic differences are being worn away. This would mean that in the long term, the Scandinavian languages would become more like dialects of the same language," he speculates.

"Anything to promote communication and understanding," concludes Fredrik Skavlan.

He has said it before. And he means it.

Winner of Peace Prize calls for ceasefire: “The law says we have two languages. That’s all there is to it.”

MARTTI AHTISAARI was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008 for his work in achieving peaceful solutions to international conflicts. He has been in many centres of conflict and has succeeded in getting adversaries to lay down their weapons and make peace. One of his most important successes was his contribution to the status negotiations in Kosovo.

This is perhaps why he so stubbornly refuses to call the Finnish language issue a problem.

“The constitution states that Finland has two languages: Finnish and Swedish. Like all citizens in a law-abiding country, we must obey the law,” says Ahtisaari, who wants to put the debate about ‘compulsory Swedish’ to one side.

His time as Finland’s President strengthened his conviction about the importance of retaining the two official languages in Finland. “If Finnish people continue to learn Swedish, we are laying the foundation for retaining Nordic collaboration. The fact that I come from a Nordic country has helped me tremendously in my peace assignments around the world,” he says resolutely.

44 **A STONE'S THROW FROM THE HARBOUR IN HELSINKI** is the office building housing the Crisis Management Initiative started by Martti Ahtisaari. This is where he carries out his everyday work. On the wall in his room hangs the diploma from the Nobel Committee in Oslo with the motivation for the Peace Prize award: *For his important efforts, on several continents and over more than three decades, to resolve international conflict.*

A visitor does not need to spend long in the company of Martti Ahtisaari before discovering his steady and rather laconic calm – a calm that has been a crucial asset during all the conflicts he has helped resolve. And he retains this calm in the heated debate about language in Finland. Although the populist Finns Party, critics of compulsory Swedish in Finnish schools, won nearly 20 percent of the votes in the election in the spring of 2011, and although Finnish media is filled with articles, letters and political manoeuvring on the language issue, Ahtisaari wants to calm the debate.

“The Finnish language issue is a non-question, as it is called in diplomatic language,” declares Ahtisaari.

Martti Ahtisaari was born in 1937 in the Karelian city of Vyborg which fell under Russian rule after the Second World War. His mother fled to avoid the worst of the war and took him to Kuopio in Northern Savolax, where he spent most of his childhood. His parents were Finnish-speakers but his great grandfather was Norwegian and married to a Swede, so his grandfather and the others in his paternal home spoke Swedish. He calculates that he has 12.5% each of Norwegian and Swedish blood, while the other 75% is Finnish.

When Martti was 15, the family moved to Oulu. Martti learned to speak Swedish fluently in his grandparents' home, in a Finnish school and in... Pakistan!

After training to be a teacher, and after working for one year as a teacher in Finland, the young Martti wanted to see the world. He went to Pakistan and worked there for three years. His workmates were Swedish, and so the language fell into place. Since then he has been a staunch defender of the position of the Swedish language in Finland, and has been actively involved in the work to retain the compulsory language that was introduced in Finnish schools in the 1970s. He was also commissioned by the Swedish Assembly of Finland to lead a state commission: "Action Programme for a Finland with Two Living National Languages". The commission put forward quite comprehensive proposals for how the two national languages could be strengthened. When asked about how he would describe the language war in Finland today, he feels no obligation to respond.

"There are no serious language wars today. The Finns Party criticism of compulsory Swedish has not been successful," he says. He sees the party as a group of marginalised middle-aged men who have been surpassed by skilled women, and is therefore a 'middle-aged men's revolt'.

However, the controversy continues unabated in Finland's public arena. On debate pages, in party programmes and on radio and TV, the lack of consensus between Finnish and Swedish speakers is seen as considerable.

"When there is nothing else to debate, then there is always the language issue," is his quiet observation.

The national report concludes that Finnish and Swedish are Finland's official languages.

"And that's that," states Ahtisaari firmly. "So far, nobody has challenged the constitution so it's a matter of obeying the law just as in all other situations. The language issue must be handled like other legal issues," he says. "A law is there to be followed. Of course, it can lead to practical problems; for example, when a case is to be considered by an authority and there are insufficient personnel available that can manage the case in the applicable native language."

"Another sign of the language issue calming down is the changed policy of the The Swedish People's Party. Previously, the party based its programme on protection of the Swedish language. But now the party has a new leader, Carl Haglund, and there is much to indicate that the The Swedish People's Party

will abandon the language issue as its central issue and instead become a more broadly liberal party,” predicts Ahtisaari.

What then is the benefit of keeping compulsory Swedish and making all schoolchildren in Finland learn Swedish? Ahtisaari refers again to the constitution that stipulates that Finland is a bilingual country. A second reason is Nordic collaboration. He is aware that some officials at the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs have proposed that English be spoken in Nordic situations.

46 “That will never happen,” says the former president firmly. “The collaboration would not be so intimate if we had to work in a foreign language like English. Such friendly relationships cannot be developed through a foreign language.” Ahtisaari refers to history and our interwoven background. Finland is a part of the Nordic region.

“I’ve benefited greatly from being associated with the Nordic region – particularly in international contexts. We are integrated in terms of culture, literature and economies. Wherever I go in the world, I can contact other Nordic embassies and get help if I need it.”

President Ahtisaari feels that the young generation in Finland sometimes has a short memory. “They have forgotten the Soviet period when Moscow wielded great influence over Finnish politics. During that time, it was extremely important that Finland could collaborate with the other Nordic countries,” he says.

Now the Peace Prize winner Ahtisaari wants to take another step to strengthen the role of democracy in the world – based on the Nordic model.

“We have been too modest about showing the world how successful our Nordic social systems are,” he states proudly, before continuing:

“We do not need extreme capitalism or socialism. We need a responsible market economy – the type that prevails in the Nordic region,” he says. “China with its 1.3 billion and Russia with its 142 million people should not look at the USA model when they are democratising their societies – they should look at the Nordic countries instead. They will see how well our education and health-care systems work. We should be more open about explaining how we’ve built our societies, and demonstrate that the knowledge can be transferred to societies like China and Russia.”

One important task for official Nordic collaboration should be to actively market the Nordic development model, and thereby help to reduce poverty in the world. At the same time, this would force the Nordic countries to preserve our successful Nordic model, that is to say societies without excessive differences in income. On this matter, he is surprised and somewhat indignant that the Social Democrat Party in Sweden has recently been awarded a patent on the expression 'the Nordic model' by the Swedish Patent and Registration Office.

"As if a political party in one particular country should be able to own the Nordic motto!"

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The president, supported by the other Nordic countries, is currently working to recommend Finland's membership of the UN Security Council. Here too, he will be emphasising the Nordic development model.

Martti Ahtisaari was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his engagement in international conflicts. In his work as a peace mediator, language naturally plays an important role.

"But not the most important one," he points out. "But of course, sometimes it's about finding the right tones in the language, the right terms."

"There are many examples in history of great statesmen whose rhetoric was considerably improved by a skilled interpreter."

Ahtisaari emphasises that, at the start of negotiations, the first task is always to ensure that everyone understands the issue in the same way. In the conflict in the Aceh province in Indonesia, the two sides spoke the same language... yet had not spoken with one another. The negotiations were held in English under the leadership of President Ahtisaari, who could also speak Swedish with freedom movement leaders during the breaks because several of them had lived in Stockholm for many years.

"The most important thing is that they start to discuss things themselves in their own language. Then there is the fundamental point about all conflict management: that the real work commences after the peace treaty has been signed. That's when communication between the parties really begins. The administration is appointed, and the work of reconstruction of war-damaged areas has to be managed. Then language and communication are needed so

that everything can run smoothly. Educated and skilled people are needed, not just friends. Instead, an attempt must be made to recruit skilled workers to provide the expertise needed in the reconstruction work.”

In other situations, interpretation and translation services are important, and Ahtisaari has great confidence in interpreters during peace negotiations. “They are skilled and professional, and they can be trusted. Often, interpreters can express themselves better than the people they are interpreting for. There are many examples in history of great statesmen whose rhetoric was considerably improved by a skilled interpreter.”

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“I don’t even want to discuss it! In my lifetime, I have never heard anyone demand that the constitution be changed – not even The Finns Party.”

But, once again, the president does not feel that the language issue is vital to his work as a peace mediator. Furthermore, most leaders around the world now speak reasonable English. And, yes, the parties do try to make a good impression on the mediator by using well-balanced language.

Ahtisaari is pleased about the development of English as the world’s *lingua franca*. However, he hopes that the spread of English will not intrude upon the desire to retain individual languages and for people to learn others.

“The more languages a person knows, the better,” states Ahtisaari, and regrets that, as a child, he did not learn Russian, which was available in schools at that time.

He speaks fluent English after his successful career in the international community. In 2000, with the aid of donations, he started the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), which manages projects linked to various centres of conflict in the world. In areas such as Africa, Asia and the Black Sea, projects and reconciliation work are taking place relating to various peace issues. CMI is an organisation with English as its natural working language, because approximately half of the employees are not Finnish. Media monitoring is an important part of the work: the president has the Financial Times and Herald Tribune in his newspaper rack, and reads them daily in order to obtain a global overview of events. His colleagues also read the news in French and German.

The newspaper rack also contains a domestic newspaper with a front-page headline describing the Finnish-Swedish language issue as a 'conflict'.

"Anyone regarding that issue as a conflict has no idea what a conflict is." Ahtisaari reiterates that the position of Swedish is not a problem in Finland. "I don't even want to discuss it! In my lifetime, I have never heard anyone demand that the constitution be changed – not even The Finns Party. As long as we have the constitution as it is today, then every government must follow it very closely."

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Are there political forces that would be capable of making Finland a monolingual country?

"I'd rather not even think of it," says the president. "We need Swedish – particularly we Finnish-speakers. I have criticised my Swedish-speaking friends because they switch to Finnish when they meet me. How can I defend Swedish if my friends don't even dare speak Swedish with me! But since I pointed it out, most of them now speak Swedish with me."

Ahtisaari wonders about the role of the media in society and in the language debate. Despite everything, the language issue has become so important, and he wonders whether this is largely due to the media preferring conflicts to consensus. And also emphasises that Finland is a western democracy with statutory freedom of the press and free media.

"I feel the debate about the role of Swedish in Finland has become more balanced lately. I hope that children and particularly their parents will support and understand the importance of learning Swedish in school. By doing so, parents are giving their children another tool for success in life and in society."

"And, unlike me, they would avoid having to go to Pakistan to learn Swedish," laughs ex-president Ahtisaari.

World languages find a home in Iceland

“There’s no such thing as a small language. All languages are big in their home countries.” This is the view of AUÐUR HAUKSDÓTTIR, director of the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages in Iceland, which has recently received UNESCO approval to set up an international language centre. The institute is named after the former Icelandic president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, who throughout his life fought for linguistic and cultural diversity in the world and also promoted the use of Nordic languages in various situations. This institute conducts in-depth research into language, culture, language teaching and translation – all with the aim of promoting language skills and increasing awareness of the communicative and cultural functions of language.

“In the modern world, no longer are there peoples with single languages, but different peoples with many languages,” says Auður.

52 IN ICELAND, FEWER THAN TWENTY BUILDINGS are more than two hundred years old. Iceland was a poor country, and the inhabitants' houses of peat and stone were easily destroyed by earthquakes, wind and water. Not until the 19th century did people start to build houses that could withstand the climate on this island in the middle of the Atlantic, halfway between Europe and America.

"Our culture and our roots are found not in architecture but in language – in the language recorded in our ancient Icelandic literature and in the language we inherited from previous generations. With its domestic and imported words, the Icelandic language describes our roots, experiences and relationships throughout history. Our origins can be traced in texts and in our spoken language, so language is the major source of knowledge about life in days gone by," says Auður Hauksdóttir, who in addition to chairing the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute is also Associate Professor of Danish at the University of Iceland. Through her knowledge of the Danish language she can also understand and use Norwegian and Swedish.

Iceland was originally largely populated by Norwegians from the west coast of Norway, and the Icelandic language grew out of the Norwegian of that time. Much of the oldest language is common in the Nordic languages – words such as *fjáll*, *vatten*, *hav*, *hand*, *fot*, *kropp* and *sjöfart* are ancient and can still be understood over the Nordic language boundaries. This common language base shows that we are related, even if modern languages have developed in different directions. Auður points out the significance of Iceland's isolated geographical position. This is one of the reasons why the Icelandic language has not been affected by external influences and altered to the same extent as Scandinavian languages. Today's Icelandic is also considerably closer to ancient Norse than the other languages.

However, this is an over-simplification. Because of Iceland's remote position in the North Atlantic and its dependence on international contacts, Icelanders

were leading mariners who created long-distance connections. This has exposed the language to considerable influence and change. In particular, the translation of the Bible that was completed in 1584 – 34 years after the Danish translation – was very significant for the enrichment and development of the Icelandic language, and resulted in the ecclesiastical language being completely Icelandic.

“Language links us to other countries, and in our language we can interpret how we’ve developed as a people through contacts with other countries,” says Auður. The Eddic poem *Hávamál*, which tells us a lot about Nordic views on life during Viking times, contains many observations about how to socialise with strangers. Icelanders have always been very dependent on trading and other contacts. They returned from their voyages around the world and enriched their domestic culture. In Iceland, there is an expression for this: *Heimskt er heimaalið barn*, which is roughly translated as “the child who is only brought up at home will have a very restricted outlook”.

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“All the Nordic languages give us access to the same culture and are actually variations on the same theme.”

“We welcome this open contact, it’s a strategy that we’ve applied for more than a thousand years,” says Auður, proud of her peaceful Iceland that has never been involved in a war. “The Icelandic language has strong cultural links to the Nordic region. In many ways, ancient Icelandic poetry is ancient Norse – it is not just about Iceland but about the entire Nordic region. All the Nordic languages give us access to the same culture and are actually variations on the same theme.”

“The similarity of our societies can be seen in the languages: our ideologies, our views on human rights and our democratic outlook, are reflected in our languages. The concepts and words have developed largely in parallel, and the points of reference are the same. Language preserves our thought patterns, our culture and our attitude to democracy. Freedom and rights are built into the language and bear with them ideas that constantly affect our societies,” says Auður.

She cannot emphasise strongly enough the importance of retaining the Nordic languages in official Nordic collaboration. She gives no countenance to the suggestion of reverting to English to make things easier for Finns, Greenlanders and Icelanders. The Scandinavian languages serve as adhesive and facilitate

contact. She takes the Icelandic relationship to the Faroe Islands as an example: Icelandic and Faroese are similar and can be more easily understood over national boundaries than Scandinavian languages.

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"I believe that similarities between the languages are an important reason why Icelanders and Faroese are so close to one another. In terms of geography, Greenland is closer but there is a clear linguistic boundary," says Auður. We can understand and communicate with each other in the Nordic region, and we also have similar values on many important issues, so we can often take joint action and speak with one voice in the world. Auður agrees that, of course, we must also use English, but only as an auxiliary language to help us act internationally and bridge communication difficulties.

"There's no such thing as a small language. All languages are big in their home countries. As in Iceland for example. It may be a small country... but the language is big. It contains the entire world."

How then can we learn each other's languages in the future and ensure the survival of the Nordic languages?

"We can't take anything for granted," she says. "We must fight for our languages and our linguistic values, and enable our languages to thrive and develop. Modern cultural conditions are complicated. However, as we in Iceland must withstand nature when it exerts its strength, we must also be able to withstand cultural development when it is steered too much by commercial interests and temporary trends – it is not an immovable law of nature."

Auður thinks that the EU can be a role model in terms of language management. In the EU, a lot of emphasis has been placed on allowing all member countries to operate in their own languages, and interpretation and translation services are important instruments. "We can also adopt that approach in the Nordic countries when language skills fail," argues Auður.

"Language strongly influences the nature of the collaboration. Just imagine if the EU had decided that one of the major languages – perhaps French or German – should be a common working language for the entire union. That would have completely changed the collaboration."

“There’s no such thing as a small language,” says Auður. “All languages are big in their home countries. As in Iceland for example. It may be a small country... but the language is big. It contains the entire world.”

Seen the other way round, the world contains many languages. There are estimated to be nearly seven thousand different languages in the world, many of which are shrouded in mystery and have no written form. Many of the world’s languages have already disappeared and even more are endangered. The causes of this are global and political developments, demographic changes and the fact that a foreign language may have been given too dominant a position, which often weakens the status and function of local languages. The threat to linguistic diversity in the world is serious.

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The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute in Reykjavík was founded ten years ago, as part of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Iceland. Iceland’s former president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, actively promoted language issues, and she subsequently became the world’s only language ambassador under the auspices of UNESCO, a title she still holds. The objective of the institute is to extend language skills in society, increase awareness of the importance of language for humanity, and to study and promote cultural exchanges between countries. This will increase contact with people of foreign origin and improve cultural expertise, both at individual level and in society as a whole. In a time of accelerating globalisation, where the whole world has become an arena for collaboration, trade, research and education, the institute wants to promote language skills and cultural expertise as keys to success. The ambition of the institute is to extend Vigdís Finnbogadóttir’s work with language, culture and communication.

The Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute will continue to be part of the University of Iceland, but a UNESCO project is now also being set up that will have the status of a UN body for the world’s languages. The activities will be housed in a separate building to be constructed in the heart of Reykjavik. Research into translation, language learning and linguistic awareness will be the main themes for the work of this international research centre.

A language museum will also be built up, offering hands-on experiences. Many problems remain to be solved about how in practice to visualise language and language issues in a museum setting. However, it is clear that the focus will be on linguistic and cultural diversity, as well as cultural understanding and linguistic experiences. Technology relating to language development is

advancing rapidly, and Auður welcomes this. The ambition is to utilise IT and modern language technology in the museum. One idea is to allow a child to say something in their own language to a robot that translates and processes their voice. The child will then hear what he or she has said in another language, but in their own voice.

Icelandic schoolchildren learn Danish at school for four years, and then continue their studies at upper secondary level. However, understanding of the Danish language is declining in the younger population.

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“That’s a shame,” says Auður, and laments that secondary school children do not always understand the benefit they would have as adults, of speaking another Nordic language. During the financial crisis in Iceland, many Icelanders moved to Norway to work, and previously many had moved to Sweden. Most people studying at universities abroad choose Denmark and then reap great benefit from the language skills learned in secondary school.

“Our ideologies, our views on human rights and our democratic outlook, are reflected in our languages.”

The saga, the language, the literature – Iceland is the home of words and is the storyteller’s promised land, with most books sold and most authors per capita. But literature has also given Iceland a global presence; from its Nordic roots, ancient Icelandic literature has been spread all around the world.

“Our ancient Icelandic poetry is world literature. It’s constantly being translated into new languages, just now to German and the Nordic languages for example.” But Auður also points out modern literature and its importance for language and culture. Not least, the Nordic Council’s literature prize has been very important in attracting interest in the language and culture of Nordic neighbours.

“You can’t open your mouth in Iceland without becoming part of the history,” laughs Auður, referring to the amount of literature still being written. “The trend is continuing today: students and people working abroad come home with new words and new knowledge, and a broadened mind is the biggest benefit,” says Auður. “People returning home add their experience to the language and culture. We should certainly not describe international exchange as a ‘brain drain’, but rather as a ‘brain gain’.

Media in Iceland and other Nordic countries are currently displaying a linguistic trend that is not always positive. Worldwide fads inflated by market forces are leaching linguistic content. Words are exploited and diluted. Texts are becoming more fragmented and short.

“However, we must remember the runestones and runic letters – they were very brief,” comments Auður with a smile. “And the brevity of expression in the sagas... what an economical use of language!”

A language like Icelandic is not easily deprived of its clarity and power. Just think of the Icelandic word for idea – *hugmynd* – i.e. a mental picture. Or see and hear the volcanism in a word that could not be more Icelandic: *eldfjall* – fire mountain!

As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water... Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten... and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me... w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!

Helen Keller

Minister in Denmark: Immigrant slang a social handicap

His first words were in Punjabi, a language spoken by more than a hundred million people. He is now a Government Minister in Denmark, and makes his decisions in Danish.

Ever since his journey from India to Denmark when he was four, his commitment to its language, but also to other languages, indeed to language issues generally, has been a key factor in his life. As Nordic Minister, children's book author or social worker – in all his roles, language has occupied a significant position.

“It is words that create and shape our surroundings,” says MANU SAREEN, Minister for Nordic Cooperation, with his roots in India.

62 “LANGUAGE DISTINGUISHES US FROM ANIMALS.” It is an often repeated but none-theless profound claim that Manu often quotes. And he continues his chain of thought in the spirit of Freud and Lacan by discussing the structure of language in the unconscious.

“Language creates the understanding and the words create reality. Our human society is built upon the linguistic structures, for better or worse. Language is our tool for understanding and bringing about change. But it can also cement misunderstanding and unfounded positions.”

Here he exemplifies a few stereotypes from our everyday media, where Finns are described as violent, Swedes as drinkers and Muslims as brutal rapists.

“If we repeat these prejudices in linguistic clothing, we also reinforce them,” argues Manu, who has long experience of work with integration issues in Copenhagen.

Manu Sareen represents the Danish Social Liberal Party, and is Denmark’s Minister for Gender Equality and Ecclesiastical Affairs. He is also Minister for Nordic Cooperation. He was born in Punjab in India in 1967 but grew up in Amager in Copenhagen, and is a qualified social worker. Throughout his life, Manu has been strongly engaged in issues and has, for example, written a book about forced marriage and a number of children’s books.

When asked about his native language, he replies without hesitation: “Danish,” and then adds “at least since I was four years old. My parents moved from India when I was small, and I still speak Punjabi and some Hindi. These are the major national languages in India.”

“I also speak English of course, and understand German pretty well. After a few beers, I also speak German pretty well,” he laughs. Humour shows clearly

through his use of language and is perhaps a not insignificant explanation to his public success, both as a politician and as an author.

Denmark elected a new government, with a socialist tinge, in 2011, and The Danish People's Party also lost much of its influence over the government's migration policy. Manu says that this was immediately reflected in the media. The front pages were no longer filled with discussions about "use of headscarves" and "immigrant criminality". The use of veils and immigrant criminality were no longer the most common issues written and talked about in the media.

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"The choice of language does not just apply to the media. It's also personally important to understand the contexts in which various linguistic forms are effective and relevant. I use one language with my family at home, and another when talking with my friends. And, of course, a completely different language when I'm speaking in Parliament," says Manu.

Identity and language are interlinked, and are tightly interwoven.

"Immigrants are often reluctant to enter the linguistic world of the new country; the threat to their own identity and culture feels too great," argues Manu. But resisting a new language is a mistake. He uses the emphatic word 'duty' to describe the importance of immigrants learning the new language. A duty for the person arriving in their new homeland, but also a duty for Danes and others to accept that their own native language can be pronounced in many different ways.

He uses Prince Henrik in Denmark – the Prince Consort – as an example. He didn't learn Danish properly and so became exposed to a kind of public ridicule," says Manu. "In contrast, the princesses that married into the family – Mary, Marie and Alexandra – are examples of the opposite. They became integrated and accepted much faster in Danish society, because they learned the Danish language."

Naturally there is a certain difference between princesses and immigrants from outside Europe. If anyone knows this, it is Manu Sareen, not least through his work with integration issues. Language does form the basis for all integration, but many other conditions are also important. He is not opposed to a language test as a requirement for citizenship, but it should not be the only deciding factor.

“What is the perfect immigrant like?” asks Manu rhetorically. “He or she speaks perfect Danish, is educated and accepts western reasoning. However, we have people in Denmark who speak perfect Danish, but who fight society as irreconcilable Islamists. The important thing is not the formalities, but inclusion in society, and that involves much more than just language skills. It’s about politics in general.”

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Groups of young people with immigrant backgrounds in all Nordic countries sometimes use a distinctive dialect called immigrant slang, which in Sweden is also called “Rinkeby Swedish” after a Stockholm suburb. “Immigrant-Danish” can sound amusing, but Manu emphasises that the phenomenon can also indicate a major problem in society.

“Many of these young people are unable to adapt their language to new situations, lack resources and are rejected by society. They therefore form their own communities, where language plays an important role in identity,” says Manu. “These young people are often excluded from many societal situations. Unfortunately, an inability to speak traditional Danish is a common cause of discrimination. It is terrible that the way language is used is such a major factor in exclusion.”

The Minister is greatly interested in language as a key to integration.

“The ability to read and write and to find one’s way in a foreign language – it’s not enough. We must also be able to interpret the hidden messages of the language; the ability to read between the lines. That’s where culture, humour and irony are found,” says Manu Sareen. “And the key to integration.”

In terms of education, he sees Sweden as something of a role model. In Denmark, native language teaching is voluntary for municipalities, while Sweden has not only statutory teaching of the native language itself but also teaching of other subjects such as physics and mathematics in the native language. Manu feels that Denmark should look at the example of its neighbour.

However, the greatest responsibility for integration of immigrant children and young people lies with their parents. They must promote an attitude of “my life and my future are here”. If parents are convinced, and convince their children, that they will be returning to their country of origin – this has a strong influence on the children, who end up in a cultural vacuum,” says the minister.

Manu has written several children's books, all on the theme of integration and the multicultural society. The title of one of his most recent books is *What the Cousin Does is Always Right*. The story is a paraphrase of the H.C. Andersen tale with the similar title, *What the Old Man Does is Always Right*. In its modern variation, the story is set in an immigrant family in Copenhagen. Here, his characters are incarnations of the worst prejudices about ethnic minorities and ethnic Danes, both in terms of language and behaviour.

“Unfortunately, an inability to speak traditional Danish is a common cause of discrimination.”

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Books and reading are important in learning a language. By describing a modern Denmark that lies outside the definition set by the Danish People's Party, Manu wants to inspire young people to read books that portray everyday lives.

On the issue of whether Nordic collaboration is based on a fundamental language community or on cultural values, he has a clear answer.

“Before I became Minister for Nordic Cooperation, I would have immediately answered language. But since I took over the post a few months ago, I now feel it's culture. The Nordic region is unique, also in a global sense. Many other areas where countries have a common language completely lack coherence and formal collaboration. Nordic values are based on welfare, gender equality and our view of democracy.”

And the future of language in the Nordic collaboration? He says that, at the age of 45, he belongs to an interim generation. Younger people find it difficult to understand other Nordic languages, while older people find it easier. When he speaks with young people in Sweden and Norway, he sometimes has to switch to English.

“Perhaps we're in a transitional phase,” wonders Manu, who feels that the language issue must be tackled pragmatically.

“It's clear that we'll continue to speak our Scandinavian languages... for the time being,” he says with a cryptic smile.

And then he reiterates his basic position: “Words create reality. Language describes our surroundings. Language is important.”

Young people in the Nordic
region cross borders to
work and study.

But what about the languages?
Can they understand and learn
from each other's languages?

FIVE YOUNG PEOPLE
GIVE THEIR VIEWS.

1-5

☐☐☐☐☐

Gunnþórunn Gunnarsdóttir

Iceland

Student of medicine at the University of Copenhagen
but now on internship in her home town of Reykjavik

Which Nordic languages do you speak?

Icelandic, Norwegian and Danish. I also understand Swedish.

Have your language skills been useful?

Yes, I've benefited greatly from my language skills, both while studying and at work.

And your friends, what are they like at Nordic languages?

My Icelandic friends learn Danish in school, but most of them can't speak the language. It's only those that have lived in Denmark that can speak Danish. I feel that my Danish friends, in general, have a poor understanding of the Nordic languages, but Norwegians are better at understanding their Nordic neighbours.

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Daniel Mogens Ham

Denmark

Student at the IT University of Copenhagen and, in the spring term of 2012, was an exchange student in Reykjavík.

Which Nordic languages do you speak?

I speak Danish and now I'm learning Icelandic. I understand the other Scandinavian languages pretty well.

Have your language skills been useful?

Not so much yet but now I'm in Iceland, I thought it would be useful to learn Icelandic so that I could participate in society and talk with people in their own language.

And your friends, what are they like at Nordic languages?

It varies a lot. I know a few people who are interested in languages and who are good at speaking and understanding other Scandinavian languages. But I also know people who find it very hard to understand the other languages. My experience is that people with an interest in culture are generally better at understanding other Nordic languages.

Marjaana Mäkelä

Finland

Originally from Koria, now studying on a Masters programme in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Copenhagen.

Which Nordic languages do you speak?

Finnish is my native language. I also speak Swedish and Danish, because I'm studying in Denmark.

Have your language skills been useful?

When I moved to Denmark to study at university, I could already speak Swedish. That helped a lot when I was learning Danish. I had an internship at the Norden Association in Denmark, and I learned Danish while I was there. I know that many employers are looking for skills in the Nordic languages.

And your friends, what are they like at Nordic languages?

My Finnish-speaking friends in Finland have basic skills in Swedish. They understand it well, but don't use the language so often so they forget it.

Benedicte Parelus

Norway

Originally from Trondheim, now studying optometry
in Copenhagen.

Which Nordic languages do you speak?

I'm from Norway so I speak Norwegian of course. I also understand and speak Danish and Swedish... but with a slight Norwegian accent.

Have your language skills been useful?

Yes, because I'm studying in Denmark. I've got Danish teachers and other people on my course are from Denmark and Sweden. I also feel that most people should be able to understand the Scandinavian languages because they're so similar.

And your friends, what are they like at Nordic languages?

I've got friends who are half-Swedish, and they're fluent in both Swedish and Norwegian. But most are like me – they understand Norwegian and Swedish. I've also got an Icelandic friend who, as well as speaking Icelandic, also speaks Danish, and she understands Swedish and Norwegian really well too.

Olle Lerner

Sweden

Originally from Umeå and now studying drama
in Copenhagen.

Which Nordic languages do you speak?

Swedish is my native language. I now live in Denmark, so I speak Danish. I've always understood Norwegian too.

Have your language skills been useful?

For my future career, it will be very important to be able to speak Danish. My girlfriend is Danish and an ability to speak the language has been invaluable so that we can communicate in the best possible way.

And your friends, what are they like at Nordic languages?

Their language skills are virtually non-existent. My impression is that Swedes are very poor at understanding Danish, and vice versa. However, I do know a few exceptions.

The words are as leaves, old brown leaves
in the spring time
Blowing they know not whither, seeking a song.

Ezra Pound

Politicians – not people – are the threats to the Nordic language community

OLLE JOSEPHSON doesn't mince his words. He says that fine promises about a Nordic language policy have proved to be nothing but hot air, and that campaigns and projects have replaced a real language policy.

He is Professor of Nordic Languages at Stockholm University and has long experience of Nordic collaboration on language. He has a strong message for politicians and public bodies: "Popular movements pose no threat to the Nordic languages. But politicians and administrators undermine language collaboration by using English in official situations. Failure to implement decisions concerning language also weakens its position. Politicians have failed to create an infrastructure for Nordic language collaboration."

76 **OLLE JOSEPHSON IS ONE OF THE KEY NAMES IN SWEDEN** on issues concerning language policy and language cultivation. He writes articles for the language column of a Swedish daily newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, is a former chairman of the Nordic Language Council, a member of the board of the Swedish Centre for Terminology, TNC, and was head of the Language Council in Sweden.

In spite of his distinguished position in the Swedish language field, the professor is not afraid of challenging the establishment. Far from it in fact – he believes that the greatest threat to the development of Nordic languages comes from the upper echelons of society.

“The threat of English to Nordic languages does not come from young people who incorporate English loanwords. The threat comes from the powers-that-be – politicians, researchers, representatives of the financial world and business community, to name but a few – who switch to English, both in their home countries and in inter-Nordic communication. The threat to the Nordic native languages comes from above, not below,” says Josephson.

“Together the Nordic languages can hold their own much better against English.”

He is particularly irritated by the Nordic Council of Ministers using English in official situations. “Many of us are very dismayed when the Nordic Council of Ministers – the body that is supposed to support and strengthen the Nordic language community – opens conferences in English,” grumbles the professor. “Furthermore, Nordic politicians are very inactive and achieve very little in reality.” As an example, he quotes the language declaration from 2006 that contained a number of proposals about how the Nordic language community would be strengthened, with focus on areas such as education.

"If we had only achieved what was stipulated in the convention, much would have been solved," he says. Nor does Olle Josephson have much time for the campaigns that have been run to improve Nordic language understanding. "Waste of money," he states firmly.

Instead of misguided and cosmetic campaigns, Josephson advocates simpler and more natural channels for Nordic collaboration. Radically extending student exchanges is one example of a reform that would rapidly bear fruit. He also feels that a political infrastructure is needed for Nordic collaboration, where national regulatory frameworks and provisions are not barriers to Nordic integration. Naturally, economic aspects are also important for the Nordic community.

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"It is tangible practicalities that prevent Nordic integration, rather than people in general lacking feelings of affiliation with those from other Nordic countries," says Josephson.

Olle Josephson feels that one of the leading motives for a strong Nordic language community is that we live in a globalised world in which English is taking over and completely silencing other languages in an increasing number of situations.

"The old adage that 'it's not until someone meets another Nordic person in a different part of the world that the Nordic language community becomes evident' is becoming more and more outdated. Because of globalisation, people don't need to go south of Denmark to experience the Nordic language community," says Josephson. He points out that the Nordic languages are exposed to increasing pressure daily and, at times, close to home.

"Every person is entitled to their native language and is entitled to develop it. In the world we live in, a Nordic language community is really necessary in order to assert our native languages," he says firmly.

"Together the Nordic languages can hold their own much better against English. In official Nordic situations, it's very important that people can use their own native language. For example, Finnish- and Icelandic-speakers must always have access to interpreters at Nordic conferences. Interpretation is always complicated, but there are benefits when everyone can use their own native language, and discussions are much more fruitful," he says with conviction.

Olle Josephson is very interested in the increasing multilingualism in modern society. "We really do live in a multilingual society – there are approximately two hundred native languages in Sweden," he explains. "And there is actually a link between multilingualism and the Nordic community. For those people who don't have roots in a foreign country, the Nordic language community can play an important role in understanding multilingualism."

78 "All Swedes are trilingual!" states Josephson, referring to the similarity between Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. "Knowledge of the Nordic languages can therefore increase understanding of the language situation faced by immigrants. Those people that have experiences of the Nordic languages can more easily understand the situation of those people who are multilingual in Turkish, Arabic or Kurdish."

"Our acceptance of many English loanwords into our languages is not a problem."

Josephson argues that language can primarily be seen as three different phenomena: communication, identity and ideas. He dwells particularly upon the communicative aspect, and he is not at all sceptical to loanwords and changes.

"On the contrary! Our acceptance of many English loanwords into our languages is not a problem. A language that is not used will not survive. And when a language is used, it changes," says Josephson. The experienced professor finds the concept of a 'pure' language totally absurd, and also regards the concept as an enemy of multilingualism. His view is that languages are mixed spontaneously and naturally, and various languages can be used to supplement one another. For example, English can be ideal as an introductory language between Swedish and Danish young people.

In 2005, Olle Josephson was involved in developing a major Nordic survey that examined Nordic language skills in young people at upper secondary school. Best at understanding other Nordic languages were young people from the Faroe Islands, while young people in Denmark understood least. The survey also showed that young people understand the languages of their Nordic neighbours less than older generations.

However, Olle Josephson does not want to interpret the results too negatively. He attributes the poor test results more to attitude, status and the design of the test. On the contrary, the professor claims that young people are communicating

like never before over Nordic borders. As an example, he mentions that the number of students of Danish is growing strongly at Swedish universities, and that the service sector in Oslo would probably collapse without young people from Sweden. This trend will grow.

“We will be hearing more Norwegian and Danish in Sweden in the next 10-15 years,” he forecasts confidently.

The power of words and the words of power

“Language is power. People who master language also master their surroundings.”

These are the words of TUIJA NIKKO, professor at Aalto University in Helsinki. Her research focuses on how language culture in Finnish and Swedish companies changes after a business merger. She has eavesdropped in boardrooms where the members have different native languages. A company merger is not all sweetness and light.

Such boardrooms have to tackle underlying historical traditions of bickering between sibling countries and a national battle of prestige. In order to make constructive decisions, board members need to put aside athletics tournaments and World Championship Finals in ice hockey. And they do. Using a language imported from overseas. English.

82 “FINLAND WAS SWEDISH FOR A LONGER PERIOD than skåne has been,” Tuija Nikko points out. She is quality director at the School of Economics in Helsinki, which is part of Aalto University. Tuija works at the Finnish-language School of Economics, in the neighbouring building to the Swedish-language equivalent, Hanken.

Her name sounds Finnish and Finnish is her native language, but Tuija also speaks perfect Swedish. Her childhood in Vasa in Ostrobothnia was a blend of the two languages. Half of her neighbours spoke Swedish, half Finnish. Everyone spoke their own language, but still understood one another. Already at the age of twelve, she wanted to improve her Swedish language skills and so spent her adolescent summers immersed in a Swedish language environment – in Umeå on the other side of the Kvarken Sea. At home, she often watched Swedish television and read Swedish in *Bildjournalen*, the popular magazine for young people.

At around the same time, major emigration of Finnish workers to Sweden was taking place, and Tuija started to study Swedish at university in Helsinki. She was so successful that she subsequently became a doctoral student. The subject of her thesis was the management of language when Finnish and Swedish companies merge.

The Finnish and Swedish business communities have become increasingly integrated in recent decades. In the footsteps of globalisation, cross-border mergers and takeovers between Swedish and Finnish companies have become commonplace. Finnish-owned companies in Sweden have around 60,000 employees, and Swedish-owned companies in Finland employ around 50,000 people. These figures apply to not only large companies, but also many small and medium-sized companies.

Finnish-Swedish company mergers can be seen from two opposing angles. They have been seen as an expression of a revival of the collaboration between sibling countries, and they have also been described as a type of international antagonism. The unique and unparalleled nature of the Finnish-Swedish relationship is integral, based on geographical proximity, a long common history and a similar industrial structure. Cultural and linguistic differences between Sweden and Finland have also been emphasised. Differences in communication culture and management style have proved to be particularly interesting.

The amount of discussion and the speed of decision-making varies greatly between the two countries. Swedes are more inclined to carefully discuss proposals and to gather support at all levels before taking a binding decision. In contrast, Finns make decisions faster, with the manager taking responsibility. Rapid decisions mean efficiency for Finns, whereas Swedes see the same phenomenon as an expression of rigid hierarchy and lack of participation in decision-making. What Finns interpret as unnecessary idle talk, Swedes see as an expression of democracy and participation. Both describe their own communication in positive terms and the other's in more negative ones.

Tuija Nikko was interested in examining how these cultural differences were bridged, as well as how the language problem was handled. In her doctoral thesis, she chose to examine two large Swedish-Finnish groups: the forestry giant Stora Enso and the Nordea bank, which became MeritaNordbanken after the merger.

"I wanted to examine working language and the language of the coffee break at a workplace in which different national cultures suddenly had to get along," says Tuija.

So what happened?

In both cases after the mergers, the companies quickly decided to introduce English as the working language. All meetings were to be held in English and all documents were to be written in English.

Tuija Nikko feels that the introduction of English as working language was generally a very successful measure. English meant that everyone could meet on neutral ground, which largely bridged the Finnish-Swedish culture gaps and defused many conflicts. The power was not Finnish or Swedish – it became

international, based on English. And because the companies became internationalised internally, they found it easier to look outwards and act more efficiently on a global level.

But aren't Finnish-speakers or Swedish-speakers handicapped when they must use English? Don't problems arise that reduce quality, both in production and in communication?

84 "Not at all," says Tuija. "English conversation can be described as an interaction between experts willing to collaborate within a field. Employees displayed a practical adaptation to each other's habits and procedures at meetings and in other ways of communicating. Staff quickly learned the terms in their professional field, and the language needed to do a good job." Tuija could also observe that the English language became spontaneously enriched with Swedish and Finnish expressions. Where a person lacked an English word, they instead used a Finnish or Swedish word that someone else in the group would then translate.

But in spite of this English success story, Tuija found that people did not stop speaking their own native languages. In coffee breaks and at the start of official meetings, the small talk was in Finnish or Swedish – not in English. And it turned out that no less than eighty percent of internal business communication within the respective countries was still carried out in Finnish and Swedish.

"Young people's Nordic identity is weakening."

"Communication is so much more than formalities, meetings and documents. Communication forms cannot be completely steered from above," says Tuija. "Culture and language are linked. People feel differently when they speak a foreign language, and their identity changes. A difference arises between the Finnish or Swedish private individual and the English-speaking professional."

Tuija does not feel that official Nordic collaboration should follow the examples of companies. "Here we should continue to use the Nordic languages, which encompass our culture. Interpretation and translation services must be on hand when language skills fail," she says. This is in spite of the fact that fewer and fewer people in Finland speak and understand Swedish. Today, Swedish and Finnish young people often communicate in English.

"Young people's Nordic identity is weakening. They are looking towards Europe

and the world, and the use of English is becoming more natural.” Nevertheless, she defends educational programmes in Swedish and Finnish. Today, English is becoming increasingly dominant at university level, and it is becoming increasingly important to preserve the native languages side-by-side with English, she feels.

“There are people in Finland who have never heard a living person speak Swedish.”

The debate about ‘compulsory Swedish’, i.e. the obligation to study Swedish in Finnish schools, is a heated one in Finland.

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“There are people in Finland who have never heard a living person speak Swedish, and I understand why they think it’s pointless studying a language that they will never use,” says Tuija.

Although she is an ardent defender of the place of the Swedish language in Finland, she wonders whether retaining Swedish as a compulsory language in schools does Swedish a disservice.

“The hostility to Swedish may well be rooted in people feeling that Swedish in school was so difficult and pointless. Young people on occupational programmes in their teens are negative because Swedish seems so unnecessary. The Swedish language would benefit from being made optional throughout the school system,” says Tuija.

However, knowledge of Swedish is undoubtedly a merit on a CV. Anyone looking to study at university and subsequently making a career requires Swedish as well as Finnish. Bilingualism plus English is a must for anyone aspiring to executive positions in Finland.

She regards the explicit opposition of The Finns Party to Swedish mostly as political manoeuvring.

“In reality the party is not so hostile to Swedish – they’ve simply discovered an area where they can win political points, nothing more than pure populism”, says Tuija.

“In the presidential election, The Finns Party lost a lot of ground, and our new

president Sauli Niinistö is very positive to the Swedish language and Nordic collaboration. In his opening speech, the president highlighted both the language issue and Nordic collaboration as priority areas.”

Language is power – an example is the power exercised in Nordic boardrooms, where English works well. But language is also literature, chats over coffee, a quick text message, plays on words, and declarations of love. In the Nordic perspective, language is identity and contact with neighbours. How would words like *mämmi* or *pitepalt* sound in English? And, for the time being at least, Nordic people still dream about the future in their native languages.

It is when switching to a foreign language that you notice how difficult it is to speak when you have nothing to say.

Horace Engdahl

‘Daily Nordic’ – a utopia in the Nordic media world

He is one of the most powerful people in Nordic media. CEO of the Norwegian Schibsted Group, with newspapers, media and e-commerce. More than seven thousand employees in 27 countries, and most of them in the Nordic countries. ‘Aftenbladet’, ‘Svenska Dagbladet’, ‘Aftenposten’ and ‘Verdens Gang’, but also websites like Blocket.se and Finn.no are owned by the Schibsted Media Group.

ROLV ERIK RYSSDAL’S office is high up in a commercial building in central Oslo, with a view over the city. He is CEO of Schibsted and is perhaps the person with the greatest influence over the company’s activities in the rapidly changing Nordic media landscape. In business terms, the Nordic region is a homogeneous media market with no internal boundaries. There is freedom of movement between the countries... except when it comes to language, where national boundaries are extremely well-defined.

90 THE NORDIC REGION IS A BASE FOR A VARIETY OF MEDIA – for the CEO of Schibsted, the region forms a natural marketplace.

“We have similar cultures, similar geography, similar languages and historically strong connections. Our Scandinavian cultures are variations on the same theme. Seen through the eyes of the world, we are a role model. The Nordic model is praised all around the world,” says Rolv Erik Ryssdal, who emphasises freedom of the press and its role in the democratic process. He argues that the spotlight only needs to turn to the UK and Italy to find a completely different view of editorial independence and press freedom. The scandal in the Murdoch empire and Berlusconi’s affairs are unthinkable in the Nordic countries, according to Rolv Erik.

If we have similar values and social structures, could we not then create, for example, a newspaper that could be distributed in the Nordic countries in a single language?

“No,” replies Ryssdal. “People want to read about local issues in their own native language, even if media interest and exchange is great between the countries.” He mentions the birth of Princess Estelle and the disaster on Utøya as events that are of great interest in neighbouring countries.

“The newspapers do exchange editorial material with each other, but it is then translated and rewritten. There is a long way between these collaborations and producing media on a common linguistic ground, says Rolv Erik Ryssdal. A ‘*Daily Nordic*’ newspaper will never see the light of day.”

But of course we collaborate laterally and have common ground. According to Ryssdal, Sweden is the big brother of the Nordic countries and many new media phenomena begin in, say, the *Aftonbladet* newspaper in Stockholm, and are then copied by *Verdens Gang* in Oslo. Ryssdal mentions the pink sport

supplement, weight-watching club, and a dating site as examples.

However, he feels that not everything can be applied across national boundaries in Sweden and Norway, and gives the e-commerce site, *Finn.no*, as an example. Schibsted tried hard to launch the site in Sweden, but failed. Instead, the Group ended up buying the already established *Blocket.se*.

On the subject of TV programmes in Nordic languages, Rolv Erik mentions the popular talk show with Fredrik Skavlan that is broadcast in both Sweden and Norway, and observes that it is shown with subtitles. According to Ryssdal, this is mostly because of the difficulties Swedes experience in understanding Norwegian, while Norwegians find it easier to understand Swedish. During his time at *Aftonbladet*, his Swedish staff sometimes found his Norwegian hard to understand.

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“The need for strong English language skills is greater than the need to improve skills in neighbouring languages.”

“Language in itself is incredibly important,” says Rolv Erik Ryssdal. “But if we look at developments in a broad perspective, there is an unstoppable trend towards greater use of English in many areas. In terms of digital media, all small languages will encounter problems in the future.”

The Nordic languages are also being forced out within Schibsteds own management and the work of the company. Two people who cannot speak the Scandinavian languages will soon be elected to the Schibsted Group board, and so English will become the business language. And Rolv Erik believes that this will put pressure on Nordic values and Nordic culture.

“The need for strong English language skills is greater than the need to improve skills in neighbouring languages. This may go so far that the inter-Nordic language may become English one day,” speculates the Group CEO.

Nordic languages are also becoming tinged with English. We spice the languages with English words, particularly young people. Rolv Erik has seen this in his own children.

“Development of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, has a great influence on the media market,” says Ryssdal. The trend presents a challenge

to the media companies, and he points at the USA where the battle of the giants is taking place.

"In the worst-case scenario, Facebook, Apple, Google, Microsoft and other major media players could become completely dominant on a global scale. A handful of players are taking much of the world's media and advertising revenues," says Rolv Erik. "The global trends have come to stay. Scandinavian digital meeting places are already losing ground to the big players. And with this development, the small language areas will undoubtedly suffer."

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What about the future of paper newspapers?

"They will still exist in five or ten years," forecasts Ryssdal, "but will mainly be read by older people, and will to a certain extent be aimed at an elite group in society." He uses Schibsted's own newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, as an example.

"But we know absolutely nothing about the situation in fifty years. We don't know if there will be paper newspapers or whether digital media will take over completely. Perhaps a Facebook account will become just as important as a telephone number or a bank account," he speculates.

We know that people today want a mixture of local, national and international news in their newspapers, but still in their own language. Major initiatives in Europe, like '*The European*' newspaper – an international newspaper in English – have not been successful. At the same time Ryssdal emphasises the increasing internationalised behaviour of young people all over the world.

"Media consumption is the same in Luton, Lyon and Linköping." But what this means for Nordic languages, identity and culture, he does not know, nor can he predict the future of the media market.

For the time being, paper newspapers survive and are still of key importance in the political world. Ryssdal names Estonia in this context. Here Schibsted owns the largest daily newspaper, *Postimees*.

"I've just been to Tallinn, invited by the Prime Minister of Estonia," says Rolv Erik. "He thanked me for our role in developing free media in Estonia. It was one of my proudest moments as Group CEO."

The media landscape is changing rapidly, as are conditions for the Nordic languages. Nobody knows exactly what the future will bring.

The Schibsted Group has the Nordic region as a vantage point, experimental field and development area. Probably not a bad position from which a media group can meet the future.

Danish and compulsory Swedish – controversial languages for The Finns Party

The date is 1 March 2012. Finland's newly-elected president Sauli Niinistö has just taken the ceremonial oath in parliament and has assumed his position. His speech is given first in Finnish and then in Swedish. Some traditions in the ceremony can be traced back to the times of both Russian and Sweden supremacy. The members sit solemnly and attentively in the parliamentary assembly hall, among them 33 members of The Finns Party. One of these is MARIA TOLPPANEN, formerly a social democrat, but now a member of The Finns and a critic of Finland's handling of the issue of increasing immigration. But she is also critical about what is called 'pakkoruotsi' in Finnish – compulsory Swedish – the compulsory teaching of Swedish in Finnish schools. She feels that Swedish-speaking Finns have too much power in society in relation to their share of the population.

96 **LIKE MARIA, THE NEW PRESIDENT HAS FINNISH AS NATIVE LANGUAGE.**
The very evening the presidential election was decided, he emphasised the significance of the Swedish language and the relevance of Nordic collaboration.

In Finland, this can be controversial. When The Finns Party increased its number of votes severalfold in last year's general election, its manifesto included explicit criticism of the disproportionate amount of power held by the Swedish-speaking minority in society. And strong criticism of 'compulsory Swedish'.

"There should be a free choice of language learned in school. Many people think it's pointless to learn a language that will never be used," argues Maria.

She herself speaks good Swedish, learned in school whilst growing up in Rovaniemi in Finnish Lapland. But it is in her native language, Finnish, that she has worked as a journalist at YLE, Finland's public service company. She started her political career as a social democrat, driven by what she calls a sense of justice. But in the mid-1990s, when the crisis was at its worst in Finland and cutbacks were affecting pensioners and low-income families, she finally left the Finnish Social Democratic Party and devoted herself to journalism. For a long time she kept away from politics. This lasted until nearly two years ago, when a former party colleague from the Social Democrats, Matti Putkonen, told her that he had joined The Finns Party. He tempted Maria back to political life and to the Finnish parliament, but this time as a member of The Finns.

The key issues are the same as those for similar parties in the other Nordic countries. The Finns have recently started closer collaboration with the Danish People's Party, and in the Nordic Council The Finns are in alliance with the Danes. And like the Progress Party in Norway and the Sweden Democrats, they do not want to help ease the problems experienced by the euro. They also share great suspicion of various immigrant groups. "We can't absorb an increasing number of immigrants and not give them the same living conditions

as others in Finland – this creates dissatisfaction and exclusion,” says Maria. In particular, she argues that illiteracy is growing in line with immigration. She refers to immigrant women and points out that many of them cannot read and write and can never participate in working life.

“No, we are not going to stop immigration,” she says. “But those who come to Finland must learn Finnish, live like Finnish people and obtain a work permit.”

Pakkoruotsi, compulsory Swedish, is what The Finns Party and other critics call the obligatory teaching of Swedish in schools. A unilateral compulsion, argues Maria, who is critical of the fact that Finnish-speakers must take a Swedish language test in order to complete university education, but not vice versa. At the country’s only Swedish-language university, Åbo Akademi University, students can take a degree without knowing a word of Finnish.

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“In eastern Finland, it would be much better if people learned Russian instead of Swedish.”

“In eastern Finland, it would be much better if people learned Russian instead of Swedish,” argues Maria. “Not all Finnish people need Swedish. But everyone with Swedish as their native language needs Finnish to get on in society.”

However, the constitution states that Finland is bilingual, and Maria is not optimistic about the statutes being changed. She does not believe a decision can be taken to legally establish that one language is more important than the other. But at the same time she is critical of the Swedish-speaking minority.

“They have too much power and too many privileges in proportion to their numbers,” says Maria, and also criticises the language spoken by Swedish-speaking Finns. “It’s not real Swedish – the language is blended with Finnish and English and has lost touch with its origins. On radio and TV, for example, there is one TV channel (YLE Fem) and a couple of radio stations that broadcast only in Swedish. That’s a lot in relation to the 300,000 people who have Swedish as their native language,” she feels.

The working language in the Nordic Council where Maria has a place is ‘Scandinavian’. Members are expected to participate in meetings held in the Scandinavian languages and read documents in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. It is translated and interpreted of course, but not sufficiently, according to Maria. She is a member of the Culture, Education and Training Committee,

which has a Danish chairman, and so many of the documents are in Danish.

“We don’t work under the same conditions as the Scandinavian-speakers.”

“For me as a Finnish speaker, both spoken and written Danish are completely incomprehensible,” says Maria. She makes no effort to hold back from the word ‘discrimination’. “We don’t work under the same conditions as the Scandinavian-speakers,” she says.

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Should we then switch to English in the official Nordic collaboration? Maria will not hear of it. “We have our languages, our identity and our culture, and we prefer to muddle through by speaking some sort of “Swenglish,” “Danglish” or even “Finnlandic” with each other during the breaks and at dinner. Language is culture and identity, and the Nordic region has a common identity in spite of the languages,” says Maria.

“Finns are a Nordic people,” she emphasises.

She herself is happy to talk Swedish. “Although with a few mistakes sometimes,” she says. “But it is necessary in order to feel part of the rest of the Nordic region, and there is no need to create a kind of Nordic Esperanto language,” says Maria.

Maria Tolppanen is accompanied to the presidential ceremony by her granddaughter, Jenita. I ask Jenita if she can speak Swedish. She is 14, and has been studying Swedish at school for a year and a half. She shakes her head sulkily at my question, and explains to her grandmother in Finnish that she has not learnt anything from her Swedish lessons yet.

“Learning Swedish must be voluntary,” emphasises grandmother Maria, and proposes a geographical division where at least the whole of eastern Finland should be exempted from compulsory Swedish.

According to Maria, Jenita should be free to choose whether she will study Swedish, Spanish, French or German. In eastern Finland students should also learn Russian, she says, pointing to major immigration of Russians in the border areas.

Grandmother Maria feels she is quite liberal for a member of The Finns Party –

most of her colleagues are much tougher in the demand to abolish 'compulsory Swedish'. She is also proud that 13 percent of those that voted for her come from Swedish-speaking areas – according to Maria, proof that even many of the Swedish-speakers want to see the abolition of Swedish as a compulsory language.

The Finnish language battle has its roots in the 19th century. As in many other countries, people in Finland started to reflect over their national identity and language issues. Since the early Middle Ages, Finland has had both a Finnish-speaking and a Swedish-speaking population. Swedish dominated in public life during the many years that Finland was part of Sweden, but when Finland in 1809 fell under Russian supremacy, there were calls to strengthen the status of the Finnish language. People referred to a 'Fennification' of public life.

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Advocates of these ideas were members of the Fennoman movement, but it was not long before a counter-movement – Svecomen – grew up which defended the Swedish role. The ideas of Fennoman found a strong supporter in the prolific writer Johan Vilhelm Snellman. Another powerful advocate of strengthening Finnish identity was Elias Lönnroth. He travelled around Finland and collected a large number of Finnish folk ballads – an ancient folk poetry with roots as far back as heathen times. He wove these together into a long poem, *Kalevala*, which became the Finnish national epic.

Later, during the Finnish battle for independence and civil war, the linguistic front lines were complicated and poorly defined, and during the Second World War the debate silenced completely. When Finland was exposed to a serious external threat, Finnish speakers and Swedish speakers united in resolute defence of the country's independence.

The tone of the debate continued to be low-key in the post-war period until the end of the 20th century, since when the debate has blown up again and become increasingly heated. That Swedish became compulsory in the final years of compulsory education in the 1970s, may have helped to accentuate the conflict. Previously, it had not been compulsory until upper secondary school. The old argument resurfaced that Swedish-speaking Finns are a small, privileged upper class that, at high cost to society, forced unnecessary Swedish on Finnish-speakers. In particular, the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity was a powerful driver of this issue.

In a strong counter-reaction in certain Swedish-speaking Finnish groups, Finnish-

speakers were described as barbarians and Swedish-speakers as bearers of culture in the country. However, the conflicts should not be over-exaggerated. The majority of the population held, and still holds, a balanced debate on the issue.

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In 2003, a new Language Act was passed. Bilingualism was emphasised in the new legislation, but the issue was decentralised, and local authorities were given various language obligations depending on the local linguistic situation. The municipalities were divided into four categories: monolingual Finnish, monolingual Swedish, bilingual with Finnish as the majority language, and bilingual with Swedish as the majority language. The overwhelming majority of municipalities were monolingual Finnish, 19 were regarded as bilingual with Finnish as majority language, 15 were bilingual with Swedish as majority language, and only three municipalities (apart from Åland) were given the status of monolingual Swedish.

So what is the future for language in Finland? Researchers, politicians and academics largely agree that the constitution, with its clear position on Swedish, will not change in the foreseeable future. At the same time, society is moving towards a situation where it is becoming increasingly vital to speak Finnish and where Swedish is weakening.

“We in The Finns Party only really want justice and freedom of choice in terms of language. Is that so strange?” asks Maria Tolppanen.

The debate continues about compulsory Swedish. Is it a non-productive compulsion or a bridge to other Nordic countries and the European languages? Here, The Finns Party and Maria Tolppanen have a clear opinion. Whether they can continue to win votes on the issue only the future will tell.

The most fruitful and natural exercise for our minds is, in my opinion, conversation. I find the practice of it pleasanter than anything else in life.

Montaigne

Nordiska språk

New member of the Swedish Academy knows why Danish is hard to understand

TOMAS RIAD sympathises with Nordic people who find spoken Danish hard to understand. He can also explain why this is the case. According to Riad, the only solution is practice, which is why he is also a keen advocate of more teaching of neighbouring languages. “We have everything to gain from teaching our schoolchildren the neighbouring Scandinavian languages,” claims Riad, Professor of Scandinavian Languages at Stockholm University and, since 2011, one of the 18 members of the Swedish Academy. One of his specialist areas is the function of speech sounds in our languages.

104 “DANISH PHONOLOGY IS A CLEAR BARRIER to understanding of spoken Danish”, says Tomas Riad, Professor of Scandinavian Languages at Stockholm University. His research specialisations are language history, verse metres and prosody, but also phonology. Phonology is the science of the function of speech sounds in a language system, for example which speech sounds give a difference in meaning.

“There are a number of other reasons why spoken Danish is so difficult to understand,” explains Riad. “In Danish, unstressed vowels at the ends of words have largely disappeared, and consonants also cause problems. Pronounced consonants have become softer in several stages through history, and become sounds that other Nordic people have difficulty in relating to their own consonant sounds.” He gives as an example the Swedish word *hage* (field) that in Danish is pronounced *hæw* (which today means garden). The ‘G’ sound has been softened so that it resembles a vowel and is no longer perceived as a consonant.

Swedes and Norwegians can almost become irritated at Danes who don’t seem to be bother about speaking properly and articulating normally and clearly like other people.

But they do... in their own way. Of course, Danish is a language with its own sound system like all other languages so, unfortunately, it is not simply a matter of telling a Dane to get a grip and speak properly. The only way to understand Danish better is to practice listening in a special way, and to learn to distinguish between and identify the rather unusual Danish speech sounds. And to discover that they really are very attractive!

“For a Swede, written Norwegian or Danish are just as hard or easy to read, but it is often much easier for a Swede to understand spoken Norwegian than Danish. This is because the Norwegian and Swedish speech sounds are more

similar,” observes Tomas. He also says that it should be simpler for Danes to understand spoken Swedish than vice versa. Swedish is spoken more clearly, and it is also closer to the Danish written language than spoken Danish is to the Swedish written language.

Riad is a strong advocate of the Nordic language community. He says that, with relatively little effort, a Scandinavian can learn to understand and read the neighbouring Scandinavian languages, which he feels brings many advantages. Teaching should be more focused on reading and speaking comprehension.

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“Swedes and Norwegians can almost become irritated at Danes who don’t seem to bother about speaking properly and articulating normally and clearly like other people.”

“The idea is that we should be able to communicate with other Scandinavians in our own language,” he says. “This would give us access to the cultural heritage of two countries, and also improve our chances of reflecting over our own language. Our language can then be placed in relation to other closely-related languages, which would be very useful in grammar teaching. Schools have an important Nordic responsibility here.”

Yes, Nordic people have a really strong interest in language and language issues. Language engages. What is correct? What is incorrect? Can you really say this or that? It can be easy to look upon language researchers as the last outpost of the law when it comes to language, and Tomas Riad would like to clarify their tasks. He feels that it is a misconception to believe that the primary task of language researchers is to correct people in their use of language – the normative aspect is definitely subordinate to the descriptive. Language researchers often have a very flexible view of language, and an open attitude to constant changes in language. According to Riad, language researchers rarely want to evaluate these changes. His view is that there is a professional tolerance for how language is used, and that the task of the language researcher should be to analyse the natural changes that take place.

Riad believes that the great public interest about what is right and wrong in a language concerns social aspects and the emotional responses triggered by various signals. This is not really the same as a genuine interest in grammar amongst the general population.

“Right and wrong are mainly a social indication that should be legitimated in terms of linguistic structure,” explains Riad. He argues that language use is often perceived and evaluated as a social attribute, in the same way someone has good or bad dress sense or a ring through their nose.

“But,” says the language professor, “language cultivation is still important. An important part of language cultivation is to educate people and to teach them how language works.” Although he relativises right and wrong in language use, he nevertheless feels that language researchers should give recommendations about how to use language in various situations and contexts.

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“It’s a completely legitimate question to wonder what is appropriate and inappropriate in various situations,” states Riad. His thesis is that, in the same way as people choose clothes and behaviour at an interview for a job, people should perhaps be careful about how they speak. “The person on the other side of the table may be a member of the language police,” laughs the professor.

Tomas Riad had a varied upbringing in terms of language. His father comes from Egypt and Tomas lived there when he was young. During that time he attended a school run by French nuns. When he was five, the family moved to Sweden and Uppsala. After leaving school in 1978, he studied the violin for one year at the Royal College of Music in London, but then his interest in language took over. He studied Swedish and English at university, then became a doctoral student, and went to the USA where he developed his interest in linguistics and Nordic languages. After submitting his thesis about Germanic prosody, Riad was awarded a doctorate in Nordic languages in 1992. This was the start of an academic career with research projects all over the world, prestigious positions in Sweden, and a professorship. On 30 September 2011, it was announced that Tomas Riad had been appointed successor to Birgitta Trotzig on chair number six in the Swedish Academy, whose most famous task is to choose the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature every autumn.

Tomas talks about the relationship between language cultivation and ‘ideal’ language. The ideal for how language is used varies in different parts of the world. He says that a certain ideal can be distinguished that characterises Sweden and the Nordic countries. It emphasises simplicity and understanding, and is intended to improve communication with the country’s citizens, and has democratic undertones. As an example he mentions the attempts of authorities and institutions to express themselves as clearly as possible when communicating with individuals.

"Our ideal about how the language is to work is very achievable if we compare with, for example, French. It's extremely difficult to learn to speak and write correctly in French," says Riad. The Nordic ideal of simplicity is alien in France, where it is felt that the elite express themselves in the correct way, and that all other language use is an expression of decay, particularly in terms of the written language. Tomas does not sympathise with the French positions. He feels that linguistic simplicity is a good ideal.

Tomas Riad is a newly-appointed member of the Swedish Academy, and when he ponders about the future tasks of the Academy, he returns to language cultivation and language use. Riad refers to one of the statutes of the Swedish Academy, which is "to work for the purity, vigour and majesty" of the Swedish language. This statute was written in the 18th century, but he says that the statute in a tangible modern context could be interpreted to mean that a literary use of Swedish is encouraged, and also that Swedish is used in all areas of society.

"Imagine if nobody wrote in Swedish any more, that would be really sad," says Riad, and refers to the growing role of English in Swedish public life.

The Swedish Academy does not have any specific Nordic duties, but nevertheless carries out a lot of Nordic work. It works closely with the other Nordic academies. The Academy also awards Nordic prizes. The most prestigious is the Nordic Prize of the Swedish Academy that is awarded to a recipient from a Nordic country who has achieved something within Swedish Academy's areas of activity and interest. The prize is SEK 350,000, nearly as much as the value of the Nordic Council Prize for Literature. The most recent prizewinner was the Icelander, Einar Már Guðmundsson.

Tomas Riad believes there is good potential for extending the Nordic work. "Like me, the other members of the Academy have a very positive attitude to collaboration at Nordic level on literature issues," concludes this very articulate member of the Academy.

Swedish rendered MARGRÉT ATLADÓTTIR mute as a child – now she is editor-in-chief of a Swedish newspaper

Language has been a significant watershed throughout her life. It prevented MARGRÉT ATLADÓTTIR from speaking when she was a child, provided her with a link to her Icelandic heritage, and landed her a prestigious job as editor-in-chief of the free newspaper 'Nöjesguiden' when she was only 25. She has two cultures in her background – Swedish and Icelandic. And, although she would not like to be without either of them, Sweden and the Swedish language were her choice as an adult.

110 **MARGRÉT LARA ATLAÐÓTTIR WAS BORN IN REYKJAVÍK IN 1985.** Her Icelandic family tree can be traced back to ancient times, but when she was two her parents left Iceland and moved to Sweden. Her father is a doctor and her mother a nurse and, like many other Icelandic academics, they were forced to move abroad in order to complete their studies. This has proved to be a life-long journey, a journey from which none of the family members have returned.

When Margrét moved to Sweden, she already spoke some Icelandic and was a happy and open child. But when she arrived in Sweden, her encounter with Swedish led to a linguistic block.

“I became completely introverted, and stopped talking entirely when other children didn’t understand what I said. My parents were very worried and felt bad because they had uprooted me from my family and my homeland,” says Margrét. She has read some letters that her mother wrote to Margrét’s grandmother in Iceland at that time, in which she expressed concern about her daughter’s language development. After a year, Margrét started to talk again, but now speaking the language of her new homeland – Swedish.

Margrét had two younger siblings, and her parents corrected them when they spoke Swedish with one another. The family was always intending to return to Iceland, so it was important that the children’s Icelandic was kept alive. Not until Margrét started upper secondary school did she begin to realise that she would not be returning to her Iceland. The reason for this was the language – she could write and speak Swedish fluently but Icelandic was much more difficult.

“I regard Icelandic as my native language, and I will never stop talking Icelandic. But I simply have to accept that I’m better at Swedish. My grandmother still sends me books in Icelandic to encourage me to read, but I haven’t done much. When I have children, I want to teach them Icelandic but I’m afraid I may have

forgotten too much. My brother studied Icelandic at university in Lund, and I should do that too.”

It is now ten years since Margrét started upper secondary school and decided to stay in Sweden. When she left school, her skills as a writer led to a number of jobs as a journalist. The family had moved to Malmö and she worked as a journalist for *Sydsvenskan*, *Punkt SE* and *Nöjesguiden*. Three years ago, at the age of 25, she was offered the post of editor-in-chief of *Nöjesguiden*, Sweden’s largest free newspaper for the entertainment sector. The editorial office has twenty full-time employees in Stockholm – most of them are in advertising sales but there are four permanent journalists and around a hundred freelancers.

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Much of her Swedish identity is rooted in the language and her job as editor-in-chief requires outstanding skills in Swedish. When she moved to Stockholm three years ago, she got the job of editor-in-chief even though she had no higher education qualification. Her writing skills were sufficient.

“I’ve always enjoyed writing and I’m an avid reader, but because my father is a doctor I too wanted to be a doctor. However, at upper secondary school, parties and clubbing became more important and my grades suffered. I had to give up that dream. But my writing has gone really well, and I’ve been lucky with good employers and have received a lot of support. That’s all really. I would never have believed that at the age of 25 I would be editor-in-chief of *Nöjesguiden*, which I started reading when I was young and I thought was a really cool newspaper.”

“At the same time, it’s such a fun type of newspaper and doesn’t take things too seriously. I regard us as one of the ‘underdog newspapers’ that hits upwards, which is very invigorating. And we also monitor the things I am interested in, like music and popular culture.”

Nöjesguiden is politically independent, but supports gender equality, and equality between classes and ethnic groups/races. Based on these values, the newspaper publishes articles and illustrations, and chooses its writers.

“We feel it’s important to choose and blend people from all the big cities like Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö. And it’s also been important for us to avoid only using ‘traditional’ journalists. They’re often middle class, come from academic families, are ethnic Swedes and have never set foot in the disadvantaged areas. In contrast, the readers of *Nöjesguiden* are much more

heterogeneous, and we try to reflect this in the paper. The readers have reacted very positively, but of course it's also about clear democratic values. But still... in Sweden in 2012 this is controversial and we receive hate letters, primarily from right-wing extremists. At the same time we feel that everything is politics, though this is something that *Nöjesguiden* previously steered clear of for fear of frightening advertisers. But today's consumers now demand the same consumer information for media as for other goods. A company – even a media company – must be perceived as having good values by the readers, and then the advertisers and the media are positive about being associated with a 'labelled' newspaper. The concept has worked well and the circulation is constantly growing."

Margrét has also experimented with language in her newspaper. In one of the editions this spring, she replaced all occurrences of she and he with the Swedish gender-neutral word *hen*, and the response was immediate. There were very strong reactions, both positive and negative. The subject proved to be very controversial.

"It was incredible that this aroused such an emotive response – it was just a word," says Margrét. "But language is controversial, particularly when it comes to gender. When we ran a complete edition on discrimination and racism, many politicians contacted us and thanked us, but when we write about gender equality we don't get the same praise. Instead, we get threatening comments. We also try to avoid stereotypes, like the bimbo figure. Patronising women and describing them as bimbos is cheap."

Margrét feels that social issues go hand-in-hand with cultural and living patterns, and she has been told that she should stick to entertainment and steer clear of politics. But ultimately of course it is the readers that decide, and so far they have welcomed the new direction.

What do the board members say, the owners of *Nöjesguiden*?

"As long as the newspaper does well financially, it's not a problem," assures Margrét. "We have the confidence of the readers, and then our owners make a profit – it's as simple as that."

Despite her Swedish life, she still has interest in her Icelandic roots. She visits at least once a year, but every time she is hit by a language shock. Although she feels she speaks fluent Icelandic, her friends and relatives show no mercy.

"I speak like a 50-year-old Iclander who has lived abroad for twenty years. When I speak Icelandic to people of my age in Iceland, they think I speak strangely. I don't know any swear words – my parents didn't teach me those of course – and there are some things I can't talk about because I lack the vocabulary, and so I borrow a lot from the Swedish language. My parents do the same. They've also lost some of their language. Icelandic is a very conservative language and invents its own words for modern phenomena like the Internet, Facebook and email. The Worldwide Web, for example, is called the *veraldarvefurinn*, which is a composite word made up of *world* and *woven fabric*. You'd think that such a word would be the same the world over... but no, not in Iceland! Facebook in Icelandic is a direct translation, *Fésbókin*, i.e. 'face book'. I don't know these types of new words, nor do I know any slang because I've never learned it."

"You'd think that such a word would be the same the world over... but no, not in Iceland!"

Iceland is a Nordic country that has common roots with Sweden, not least linguistically. But Margrét feels there are major cultural differences between the two countries. Firstly, she feels that Icelanders are much more patriotic, and have a special pride for their country. This is noticeable as the plane approaches Iceland's international airport, Keflavik.

"The cabin crew say 'Welcome home!' regardless of who is onboard. In Iceland, it is natural for people to take care of each other and each other's children – my grandmother looked after me when my mother was studying. It's very typical in Iceland for family members to support each other, for generations to live together and that family bonds are strong."

Icelandic people have children earlier than Swedes, and Margrét talks about other deal breakers – things that distinguish her from her peers in Iceland. She cannot drive, for instance, and she feels that if you don't have a driving licence in Iceland there's something wrong with you.

"My family is ashamed of me and don't want to tell people that I can't drive a car," she laughs. Other deal breakers are that she is single, she doesn't have children, hasn't started a family, and that she is not an academic.

Dual nationality, dual identity, dual cultural affiliation. Does this ever make her want to go back?

“No,” she says, “Not after the financial crisis. People have been left in a poor state. Their personal economy collapsed, they lost their jobs, they lost their homes. Many economic refugees from Iceland are fleeing to other countries.”

“I speak like a 50-year-old Icелander who has lived abroad for twenty years.”

114 When then is she Swedish and when is she Icelandic? How does she respond when people ask where she comes from? If she is away from the Nordic countries and someone asks about her nationality, her spontaneous response is “Swedish”. When she is in Iceland she also feels Swedish. Swedish is not really her native language, but has in reality become so because she has lived in Sweden for most of her life. She feels comfortable with the Swedish language, both in terms of writing and speaking. But when she is in Sweden – then she feels Icelandic.

Margrét has roots in two Nordic countries and also monitors the others through her work. But she feels that general interest in neighbouring cultures is minimal – at least in Sweden.

“I know a Norwegian song that is so fantastic that I want to make a summer hit of it in Sweden. But it will never happen. Swedes are incredibly poor at consuming the popular culture of their neighbouring countries, which is not the case in Norway and Iceland. Latin Kings became popular in Iceland even though they rapped in Swedish. In Malmö it's different. The city is close to Denmark and people can see Danish television. When I lived in Malmö, I often watched TV series with Danish sub-titles. But Sweden is biggest, so it is the country that decides. Stockholm calls itself ‘The Capital of Scandinavia’ and that is not okay. I think that much of the scene in Oslo and Copenhagen is more interesting.”

Sweden or Iceland? Both, is the answer. But the balance tips slightly towards Sweden because with language as her work tool, she would find it difficult working in Iceland.

“If I went back, I'd have to change profession.” I like Iceland, and I have all my family there, but to go back? No, I don't think so. I want to live in Sweden, live here, and eventually start a family here. But if I have children, they'll have to learn Icelandic, even if I don't speak it perfectly!

The importance of language for the development of culture lies in the fact that in language man has placed a world of his own beside the other, a position which he deemed so stable that he might from there lift the rest of the world off its hinges, and make himself master of it... Only now is it dawning upon men that they have propagated a tremendous error in their belief in language.

Friedrich Nietzsche

In 2009 the Nordic research and education ministers established a function in the language sector called Nordic Language Coordination. The establishment of this function under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers has boosted Nordic language cooperation.

In addition to coordinating activities between different units in the language sector, language coordination works with various measures to strengthen language understanding in children and young people. Language coordination will conduct outreach activities to inform about Nordic language cooperation in, for example, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools and in vocational training, teacher-training and universities.

NORDIC IDENTITY – A QUESTION OF LANGUAGE UNDERSTANDING?

By Bodil Aurstad – Head of Nordic Coordination

Nordic language cooperation is quite unique. People usually associate Nordic language cooperation with 20 million people who have the ability to communicate with each other via three mutually understandable and closely related languages: Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. The discovery that you can use a language in a conversation with someone who speaks another language is a wonderful experience, but what is truly unique in Nordic cooperation is that in the Nordic Region we have political commitment to language as a fundamental part of regional Nordic identity. In the Nordic countries we actually consider language as central to forming our identity, for people and for groups in society. Preserving the experience of communication fellowship becomes an important factor in building the special Nordic identity. An identity that helps to strengthen Nordic cooperation in areas such as education, the labour market, research and welfare.

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Nordic Language Understanding

In the Nordic countries, there is therefore the political will for language which encompasses more than the mother tongue, the national language and English. The Nordic communication fellowship is maintained through agreements and declarations – from the Helsinki Treaty in 1962 to the Language Declaration in 2006. Of particular importance in the Language Declaration are the goals that all Nordic citizens should be able to communicate with each other, primarily in a Scandinavian language, and that all Nordic citizens should have a general understanding of what language is and how it works. The research report from 2005 – *Does Language hold the Nordic Region together?* – shows at any rate that understanding of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish has deteriorated amongst young people in the Nordic countries in the last 30 years. This was seen when comparing the young people's test results with their parents' test results, and compared to the results of a study amongst young soldiers in 1972. In particular, mutual understanding between Danish and Swedish seems to have taken a step backwards in the course of a generation.

Amongst Danish-, Norwegian- and Swedish-speaking people, the Norwegians understand their neighbours best. Young Norwegians from minority language backgrounds did better than Danes with a Danish language background in the tests. The Faroese were the best of all in the study - they are a little better at Danish than they are at English and they understand Norwegian almost as well as they understand English. This makes Norway and the Faroe Islands the masters of inter-Nordic language understanding. The fact that in Norway there is a rich diversity of dialects, two written languages and a close relationship with Danish and Swedish, it is not surprising that there is a good training ground for understanding the neighbours' languages. The success factor behind the Faroese result is perhaps not easy to identify but the common feature in these language communities is that users of the language are used to managing language variation, training that clearly builds language muscles.

English and Scandinavian

Another interesting result from the study is that understanding of English is generally good across the Nordic Region. This has caused several people to question the need for Nordic language cooperation in the future. This has to be seen in the context of the trend to rank language subjects as more or less important. This ranking has its origin in the underlying notions of language hierarchy. English is first and foremost regarded as a *useful* language. And a language that is to communicate with the whole world in all sorts of international contexts and is not necessarily linked to a specific culture. Interest in other languages is, on the other hand, linked to a greater degree with an idea of belonging, of enthusiasm for a country, history, literature or a personal connection.

“English and Scandinavian do not compete with each other but are languages that play complimentary roles in society, simply because they meet different needs.”

The environment and conditions of the Nordic languages have changed dramatically in the course of two generations, i.e. the 60 years since Nordic cooperation was formalised in the Nordic Council. But language will always be developing and be in a power imbalance. For comparison we can go back 60 years before the establishment of the Nordic Council. In 1896 the dramatist Henrik Ibsen wrote in a letter to Georg Brandes: ‘You suggest to me in your last letter that I should visit London. Yes, if I knew enough of the English language

to speak it I could perhaps travel. But that is unfortunately not the case and I must therefore give up the thought.' Ibsen says that he cannot go to London because he does not speak English, and yet at that time he had already lived 24 years abroad!

Today it is unthinkable not to be able to speak English. In Norway, English lessons begin when the children are as young as six, and in many cases English is not really considered a foreign language on a par with other foreign languages. English is however not a threat in itself, but a necessary alternative in many situations. English and Scandinavian do not compete with each other but are languages that play complimentary roles in society, simply because they meet different needs. It is when we think that English can replace all other languages in all situations that English becomes a problem. Young people in the Nordic countries often turn to English when they meet other Nordic people. The question is whether the problem stems from a lack of understanding or whether it is really about identity markers in regard to urbanism, international leanings, educational level etc., and that these identity markers are experienced as more central than those belonging to the Nordic identity.

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Nordic Language Campaign

As a follow up to the results from the study of inter-Nordic language understanding and the subsequent stimulation of language cooperation, the Nordic Council of Ministers and Nordic Language Coordination conducted a Nordic language campaign entitled: 'You understand more than you think – if you dare'. The aim of the language campaign has been to focus on the Nordic language community and what it is that makes this community important. The many Nordic events and activities organised as part of the campaign have focused on identity. But instead of making a point out of historical contradictions and conflicts of culture and interest, the campaign has chosen to focus on the positive aspects of modern Nordic community: language is politics and power, but in the same way as language can divide and suppress, it can also unite and strengthen. These cultural and political considerations are not unknown to language teachers, but many people feel that the Nordic perspective has to lose the battle for attention between the many modules of the language subject. How the Nordic perspective can help make lessons exciting, especially in the subjects Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, has therefore also been a pivotal point for the campaign.

One Plus One Equals More Than Two – Nordic Synergy

A crucial factor to capture young people's interest in a positive way is the experience that it is relevant: the feeling that the Nordic perspective doesn't only affect them, but can also give them 'that extra something':

the personal meeting

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Nordic citizens who work or study in a neighbouring country are happy to act as language missionaries across borders. For the younger people in the region who are less mobile, the Norden Association does important work through its friendship class system. Friendship classes are often most successful when the pupils do not just meet virtually but also meet in real life, and if every visit is well-prepared in a way that the pupils solve the assignments together. It can involve anything from organising an outing to drawing up a common blog, writing and illustrating fairy tales, building language trees out of cardboard cartons, comparing the films *Max Manus* and *Flame* and *Citron*, making a commercial about home or a report from the school trip etc.

the early language meeting

Many educated language pilots have undergone Norden teaching for very young pupils, for example with the 'traffic light method', where words in the text are coloured: red for something which is different, yellow for something that is spelt differently, and green for something that is the same in the languages. This target group is embraced by the Nordic language campaign to a certain extent, but if you look at the Danish-German language campaign which is aimed at nursery school children, you get a good example of how early cultural contact and foreign language stimulation can be carried out successfully, even if the languages are not even mutually understandable. Under the campaign's 'Do you dare?', conference researcher Mila Vulchanova pointed out how being exposed to language variation at a young age improves the brain's plasticity. This strengthens not only the language skills of the pupils, but also their non-verbal communication skills. In short, you can say that being able to relate to diversity of language reduces the risk of becoming 'cemented between the ears'. Overcoming fears of language variation seems to be one of the success criteria for language understanding, as well as language training.

journey of discovery

Many student teachers emphasise how important they feel it is to have something demonstrated in practice, and not just to be told that there is a

language fellowship between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. The use of film, TV series and parallel language materials are brought up as something that helps to see the world through new glasses. Websites such as the Nordic countries past and present and the *Norden in the cinema* film packages are a good place to start if you, as a teacher, don't want to go hunting on book shelves, film lists or online newspapers for interesting material yourself. Websites such as the Nordic countries at school and Nordic languages, which will be launched as a result of the campaign in 2012, will also offer updated teaching materials with a linguistic angle.

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entertainment

The main political task is to improve children's and young people's understanding of modern everyday language so that we can continue to experience a Scandinavian language communication community in the Nordic countries. Everyday language which you hear in sports commentaries, films, TV series and music lyrics is educational material which is not just useful but can also be quite entertaining - just think of how the games between the Nordic countries are reported in the online newspapers!

Curricula – Drop the Nordic?

The educational sector, in cooperation with the cultural sector, is responsible for Nordic language cooperation. The curricula in the Nordic countries focus primarily on reading comprehension and cultural comprehension, typically from a historical perspective. But training in understanding the spoken word must be key to language teaching. This is an important objective because it is precisely between the spoken languages that the gap is the greatest, especially between Danish on the one hand and Norwegian and Swedish on the other. As part of the Nordic language campaign the Ministry of Children and Education, in co-operation with the Danish Language Committee and the Nordic Language Coordination, organised a conference 'Why is Danish so difficult?' in which Danish pronunciation and the challenges it poses to other Nordic citizens was the key theme. The conference attracted well over a hundred Danish teachers and subject advisers, over 30% of whom came from the West Nordic Region (the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland). *Swedish Now's* new concept 'How do you break the Nordic code?' has also attracted many teachers to courses and workshops. This shows that the non-Scandinavian language teachers tend to be interested but often lack inspiring material and new angles for tackling the Nordic languages.

Based on the Nordic perspective the subjects Danish, Norwegian and Swedish can help meet the goals of the Language Declaration. By making pupils more aware of language learning strategies and linguistic entrepreneurship, as well as cultural awareness, you give them the basis to discuss what language is and how it works. Focus on language teaching reflects society's view of which languages are important. With a new didactic approach and new material for language teaching we are taking the Nordic language community seriously.

norden

Nordic Council of Ministers
Nordic Council

Ved Stranden 18
DK-1061 Copenhagen K
www.norden.org

Why is it impossible to talk Swedish while queuing for a hamburger on a Friday night in Helsinki without getting into a fight, despite Swedish being an official language in Finland?

The Queen of Denmark, the Government Minister, the Nobel Prize winner and the young editor-in-chief all have an intense relationship with language. In this book, they – along with a number of other people with a keen interest in language – talk about how language has shaped their lives, both private and professional.

Language affects people – it engages and provokes. And power lies in language. Icelanders and Finns only have access to translated and interpreted material if they have not learned a Scandinavian language. Does the way we handle language in Nordic collaboration mean that we are creating a democratic deficit?

How are we affected by tradition on the one hand and by the accelerating change brought about by globalisation on the other? Is it a question of generational boundaries? Would young people in Nordic countries rather speak English than Norwegian? These are some of the issues touched upon in this book.

The author is a former journalist in the Swedish media world and has previously been Head of Communications at the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Nordic Council.

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