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Language use in dissertations presented at Örebro University 1999-2004 – a question of socialization

1. Introduction

The global spread of English has led to so-called losses of linguistic domains, a phenomenon studied in a great number of investigations (concerning Sweden, see e.g. Josephson 2001, 2004; *Mål i mun* 2002; *Engelskan i Sverige* 2004). The academic field is such a domain, and studies have been made of the losses within it, in Sweden (Gunnarsson & Öhman 1997, Gunnarsson 2002), as well as in other countries, for instance Finland (Wilson 2002). The aim of this paper is not primarily to investigate what disciplines and what types of texts have changed into English, but to study why a particular text type – doctoral dissertations – are written in English or in Swedish. A first attempt to answer this question was made with the help of a questionnaire, sent to all those who had presented doctoral dissertations at a particular university in Sweden, i.e. Örebro University.

After having been a subsidiary of Uppsala University, Örebro University became an independent university on July 1, 1999. Between this date and the start of this investigation, 63 dissertations were presented at it. An analysis of the languages used in these dissertations was made; actually only two languages, Swedish or English, were used, which came as no surprise. In order to investigate what factors might have influenced their choice of language a questionnaire was thus sent to the authors of the 63 dissertations.

2. Material

Among the 63 dissertations published at Örebro University since July 1, 1999, 32 have been written in English, and 31 in Swedish (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of dissertations published in Swedish and in English

Year	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
2004	7	14	21
2003	8	3	11
2002	8	7	15
2001	3	7	10
2000	3	1	4
1999	2	0	2
Total	31	32	63

The first two dissertations were presented in 1999, both written in Swedish. Since then, the number of dissertations in each language has varied, and it is difficult to discern any particular tendency over time in the choice of language.

3. Choice of dissertation language and gender

It is possible that non-linguistic factors influence language choice and that gender is such a factor. Consequently, the number of dissertations written by men and by women respectively at Örebro University between 1999 and 2004 was investigated (see Table 2).

Table 2. Dissertations written by men and women

Year	Men's dissertations	Women's dissertations	Total
2004	13	8	21
2003	4	7	11
2002	9	6	15
2001	8	2	10
2000	3	1	4
1999	1	1	2
Total	38	25	63

It is obvious that, totally, more dissertations were written by men, 38, than by women, 25 (61.9 and 38.1 percent, respectively) at Örebro University during this period, and that the relative frequencies do not seem to change in any consistent manner over time.

Whether gender has any influence on the choice of dissertation language was also investigated (see Table 3).

Table 3. Relation between gender and choice of dissertation language

Gender	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Men	19	19	38
Women	12	13	25
Total	31	32	63

Men used English and Swedish in exactly the same number of dissertation - 19 were written in each language - whereas women used English in 13 cases and Swedish in 12. This means that there is no difference worth mentioning between the genders in this respect.

4. Choice of dissertation language and discipline or subject

According to earlier investigations (see e.g. Gunnarsson & Öhman 1997), discipline and subject matter are factors that to a large extent influence the choice of dissertation language. The disciplines of the dissertations were consequently ascertained (see Table 4).

All dissertations were written in Swedish in certain disciplines, i.e. history, media and communication science, caring science, pedagogy, and social work, whereas all dissertations were written in English in other disciplines, i.e. biology, chemistry, culinary arts and meal science, economy, environmental science, medicine, psychology, statistics, and technology. Finally, dissertations could be written in either language in three disciplines, i.e. comparative literature, political science, and sociology. All in all, it is clear that discipline is a decisive – even a knockout – factor in this respect.

Table 4. Relation between discipline and choice of dissertation language

Discipline	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Biology	0	2	2
Chemistry	0	3	3
Culinary arts and meal science	0	2	2
Economy	0	1	1
Environmental science	0	3	3
Medicine	0	3	3
Physics	0	1	1
Psychology	0	5	5
Statistics	0	1	1
Technology	0	3	3
Caring science	1	0	1
History	4	0	4
Media science	2	0	2
Pedagogy	7	0	7
Social work	3	0	3
Comparative literature	3	1	4
Political science	7	4	11
Sociology	4	3	7
Total	31	32	63

5. Questionnaire - material

In November of 2004, a questionnaire with items concerning their choice of dissertation language, the checking of their manuscripts, their language background and related questions was sent to all the authors of dissertations presented at Örebro University, together with an introductory letter. In the early spring of 2005, another letter was sent to those who had not yet responded, and, all in all, answers were had from 50 of the 63 authors (79%). Among those who wrote in English, 75 percent answered the questionnaire (24 out of 32), while 83.9 percent (26 out of 31) of those writing in Swedish answered it, a difference that is not statistically significant.¹

¹ chi² = 0,757, d.f. = 1, N.S.

6. Questionnaire - results

Question 1: Dissertation language – Swedish or English (discussed above).

Question 2: The choice of dissertation language was influenced/determined by the supervisor, other teachers or superiors, colleagues or co-students, the subject of the dissertation, the traditions of the discipline, or other reasons, or simply, the choice was self-evident (see Table 5).

Those who wrote in Swedish stressed the importance of their subject matter and the obviousness of their choice (12 answers each). Those who wrote in English called attention to the traditions of their discipline and the obviousness of their choice (13 answers each). They, too, indicated that the subject matter of the dissertation was decisive (9 cases), and that their supervisors had influenced their choice (7 cases), while only two of those who wrote in Swedish claimed this.

Table 5. Factors influencing the choice of dissertation language

Influence	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Supervisor	2	7	9
Teacher/superior	0	1	1
Colleague/co-student	2	1	3
Dissertation subject	12	9	21
Discipline traditions	2	13	15
Self-evident choice	12	13	25
Other reasons	7	6	13
Total	37	50	87

Question 3: The highest level of the respondents' English studies – number of years or semesters. Table 6 shows that most authors had only studied English at senior high school level (*gymnasium*).

Table 6. Highest level of English studies

English studies	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
High school: 2 years	4	5	9
High school: 3 years or more	17	11	28
High school: Unknown number of years	2	1	3
Swedish university	3	5	8
Foreign university	0	1	1
Grew up in the USA	0	1	1
Total	26	24	50
Other	3	4	7

Most of the authors had studied English only at senior high school level (37 out of 50), and nine of them for only two years. Among those who wrote their dissertation in English, 17 respondents had studied English at senior high school, five at a Swedish university, and one person at a foreign university. Finally, one of the authors grew up in the USA, and English is her mother tongue.

In a few cases, the respondents must have misinterpreted the question since they came up with information about studies in English-speaking countries in general, instead of English language studies. This can lead to an overestimation of the length of their English studies but not to an underestimation of it.

Question 4: Experiences of English: stays in English-speaking countries (number of months) and other experiences (see Tables 7 and 8).

Most of the respondents had stayed in an English-speaking country for some time. Among those who wrote their dissertation in English, 11 respondents claimed that they had stayed in an English-speaking country between two and 18 months, and one person grew up in the USA. Among those who wrote in Swedish, 10 respondents claimed that they have stayed between one and 20 months in an English-speaking country.

Table 7. Stays in an English-speaking country

Stay	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Yes	10	12	22
No	16	12	28
Total	26	24	50

Surprisingly, 21 respondents among those who wrote their dissertation in Swedish claimed that they had had no other experiences of English than the stays mentioned above. Nine of those who wrote in English claimed that they had had other experiences (see Table 8), for instance having met foreign students and researchers in their departments, having English-speaking supervisors, or using English at work. The Swedish group mentioned literature studies, taking part in international conferences, and having bilingual relatives.

Table 8. Other experiences of the English language

Other experiences	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Yes	5	9	14
No or no answer	21	15	36
Total	26	24	50

Question 5: Dissertation in Swedish: whether the manuscript was checked by nobody, a Swedish language expert, or someone else (see Table 9). Dissertation in English: whether the manuscript was checked by nobody, a native English-speaking person, a native English-speaking person who was also a language expert, a Swedish language expert, or someone else (see Table 10).

Among those who wrote their dissertations in Swedish, 14 respondents claimed that nobody had checked their manuscripts, not even their supervisors, who were mentioned quite often in the English group. In the latter group, the respondents claimed that their manuscripts had been checked in 23 cases, and some of the respondents mentioned more than one checker (see Table 10).

Table 9. Check of Swedish dissertation manuscripts

Manuscript checking	Number
By nobody	14
By a language expert	5
By someone else	6
No answer	1
Total	26

Dissertation manuscripts had been checked by native speakers of English in seven cases, and in another seven cases, these native speakers of English were also language experts. Furthermore, supervisors and colleagues were also mentioned by those who wrote in English.

Table 10. Check of English dissertation manuscripts

Manuscript checking	Number
By nobody	1
By a native English-speaking person	7
By a native English-speaking language expert	7
By a Swedish language expert	0
By someone else	12
Total	27

Questions 6 and 7: After having finished the dissertation, the choice of dissertation language can basically be considered good/right or bad/wrong (see Table 11) because...

Table 11. Good/right or bad/wrong choice of dissertation language

Choice	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Good/right	25	24	49
Bad/wrong	1	0	1
Total	26	24	50

In 49 out of 50 cases, the respondents felt that they had made a good (the right) choice. The only negative answer was given by a person who had written in Swedish. This striking result might be interpreted in psychological terms – it must be very difficult to concede to having made a bad choice in such an important matter as this one.

Questions 8 and 9: Swedish dissertations in general ought to be written in Swedish, English, or other languages because... (see Table 12).

All respondents did not answer this question, more refraining in the Swedish than in the English group. Eleven of those who wrote in English and ten of those who wrote in Swedish claimed that this choice ought to be determined by the discipline or the subject of the dissertation.

Table 12. The proper language of Swedish dissertations in general

Proper of language	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Swedish	7	2	9
English	1	8	9
Subject-dependent, etc.	10	11	21
No answer	8	3	11
Total	26	24	50

Several authors maintained that they had no opinion in this matter, and only 18 out of 50 respondents gave a decisive answer: nine in each group. Seven of those who wrote in Swedish claimed that Swedish dissertations ought to be written in Swedish, whereas eight of those who wrote in English claimed that English ought to be used.

Question 10: Reception of support or criticism for their choice of dissertation language (see Table 13).

Table 13. Support or criticism for the choice of dissertation language

Reaction to the choice of dissertation language	Swedish dissertation	English dissertation	Total
Support	7	16	23
Criticism	1	0	1
Both	5	3	8
No answer	13	5	18
Total	26	24	50

In almost half of the cases, 23 out of 50, the author's choice of dissertation language received support: in 16 cases when the dissertation was written in English, and in seven cases when it was written in Swedish. In a great number of cases, no answer was given to this question: in 13 cases when the dissertation was written in Swedish and in five cases when it was written in English. Furthermore, eight authors claimed that they had been both criticized and supported.

Question 11: The mother tongue/first language of the author (see Table 14).

The mother tongue of the authors of these dissertations was predominantly Swedish. Totally 46 out of 50 respondents claimed that their mother tongue was Swedish, and all those who wrote in Swedish were native Swedish-speakers. The other four first languages mentioned were Bulgarian, English, Hebrew, and Dutch.

Table 14. Mother tongue/first language of the author

First language	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Swedish	26	20	46
Other	0	4	4
Total	26	24	50

Question 12: The first language of the authors' parents (see Table 15).

Table 15. First language of parents

Parents' first language	Swedish dissertations	English dissertations	Total
Swedish	52	41	93
Other	0	7	7
Total	52	48	100

All parents of the authors who wrote in Swedish were native Swedish speakers. In the English group, seven out of 48 parents had another first language than Swedish, i.e. Bulgarian, Dutch, French, German, and Rumanian.

7. Summary and conclusions

First of all, almost all the authors of the dissertations studied were native speakers of Swedish, and almost all parents of these authors were also native Swedish speakers. This, and the fact that Örebro University is a university in a non-cosmopolitan area, should caution the reader and, consequently, results must be handled with care, since they, most likely, do not apply to other types of universities, with students with more mixed backgrounds. Furthermore, only few dissertations have yet been presented at Örebro University.

Few of the authors who answered the questionnaire had studied English at university. Approximately half of them had spent some time (a few months) in an English-speaking country but claimed that they had had few other experiences of English. Furthermore, few of those who wrote in Swedish had had their manuscripts checked by language experts and only around half of those who wrote in English had had their dissertations checked by native speakers of English. Thus, it seems possible that these authors might have thought too highly of their own linguistic and stylistic capacity. Whether the authors' background in English can be considered completely adequate is an issue to be investigated further. In addition, the question concerning what norms and standards are followed, whether Swedish or Anglo-American, will be investigated.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents felt that they had made the right choice of dissertation language, whether English or Swedish. In approximately half of the cases, their choice of dissertation language had also been supported by others; only one person had been criticized in this respect. Despite this, the authors were reluctant to form an opinion and state whether Swedish dissertations ought to be written in Swedish or in other languages. Not surprisingly, among the few who gave their opinion, those who wrote in Swedish felt that others should also write in Swedish, and those who wrote in English felt that others should write in English, too.

The most common answer to this question was that the choice must be determined by the subject matter of the dissertation.

Most of the respondents claimed that the subject matter of their own dissertations, as well as the traditions of their discipline, influenced their choice of language. More English-writing respondents claimed that the traditions of their discipline were decisive than was the case in the Swedish-writing group, which might indicate that those who wrote in Swedish were less aware of their traditions, or that traditions actually are less strong in their disciplines. It is a fact that more dissertations are written in English in the sciences than in the humanities, and that formulaic language is often used in the sciences. Maybe the respondents in the English group were aware of this and had learned how to use linguistic and other formulas in what they considered a successful manner – something to investigate further, too.

In the group writing in English, several authors stated that their supervisors had influenced their choice, which gives an indication that students had been socialized into a particular culture. Finally, several authors in each group stated that their choice was self-evident, which seems to mean that, in these cases, norms had been completely internalized.

All in all, discipline seems to be the decisive factor when dissertation language is chosen, and factors like gender seem to have no influence at all. Apparently, students are socialized into a particular tradition, including a particular language choice. Further investigations will show in what way discipline influences other aspects of dissertations, for instance their style, manner of quoting, length, and structure, as well.

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