LEA – Lingue e letterature
d'Oriente e d'Occidente

Quaderni di LEA
Scrittori e Scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente

-9-

FIRENZE UNIVERSITY PRESS
2026

Quaderni di LEA – Scrittori e Scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente. –
n. 9, 2026
ISSN 1824-484x
ISBN 979-12-215-1020-1
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-9

Direttore Responsabile: Arianna Antonielli
Registrazione al Tribunale di Firenze: N. 5356 del 23/07/2004

La rivista è pubblicata on-line ad accesso aperto al seguente indirizzo:
www.fupress.com/bsfm-lea

The products of the Publishing Committee of Biblioteca di Studi di Filologia Moderna: Collana, Riviste e Laboratorio (https://www.forlilpsi.unifi.it/vp-440-laboa.html>) are published with financial support from the Department of Languages, Literatures and Intercultural Studies of the University of Florence, and in accordance with the agreement, dated February 10th 2009 (updated February 19th 2015), between the De-partment, the Open Access Publishing Workshop and Firenze University Press. The Workshop promotes the development of OA publishing and its application in teaching and career advice for undergraduates, gradu-ates, and PhD students in the area of foreign languages and literatures, as well as providing training and plan-ning services. The Workshop's publishing team are responsible for the editorial workflow of all the volumes and journals published in the Biblioteca di Studi di Filologia Moderna series. LEA employs the double-blind peer review process. For further information please visit the journal homepage (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-lea>).

Editing and composition: Laboratorio editoriale Open Access (<laboa@lilsi.unifi.it>) with F. Salvadori (copyeditor) and with the collaboration of A. Gentile and A. Lana (section editors), C. Favazza and E. Simoncini (collaborators), E. Caramitti, C.G. Cardini, S. Di Maio, G. Gargani and I. Palazzini (trainees), under the supervision of the Journal Manager and Managing Editor, A. Antonielli.

2026 Firenze University Press
Università degli Studi di Firenze
Firenze University Press
Via Cittadella 7 – 50144 Firenze, Italy
<http://www.fupress.com/>

Coherence and Fragmentation

The Languages of the Nordic Countries and Their Interrelations Today

edited by
Anna Wegener and Lena Dal Pozzo

LEA - Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/bsfm-lea

Citation: (2026) Contents. "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: p. v. doi: https://doi.org/10.1017261/lea-1824-484x-17261.

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ISSN 1824-484X (online) | DOI: 10.1036253/LEA-1824-484X-17261

LEA - Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/bsfm-lea

Introduction

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OPEN ACCESS

Citation: A. Wegener, L. Dal Pozzo (2026) Introduction. "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: pp. 7-19. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-17262.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

1. The Nordic Countries and their Languages

The term "Nordic" generally refers to the five countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, along with the three autonomous territories associated with these states: the Faroe Islands and Greenland (part of the Kingdom of Denmark) and the Åland Islands (part of Finland). The Nordic region thus covers a vast geographical area, spanning from the North Atlantic across Scandinavia to the Baltic Sea, and is home to three linguistic families: Indo-European (the North Germanic branch), Uralic (the Finno-Ugric branch) and Eskaleut (the Inuit branch) (Vikør 2002, 32; Torp 2014, 24). In terms of numbers of speakers, the North Germanic languages – especially the closely related Scandinavian languages, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish – are the most represented. The second most represented language family is the Finno-Ugric branch of the Uralic family, which in the Nordic countries refers to Finnish, Karelian, Kven, Meänkieli, and the Sámi languages (Peterson and Fägersten 2023, 3). One country in the region, Finland, is officially bilingual as both Finnish and Swedish are recognised as national languages under the Constitution.

Official policy specifies the Nordic region as multilingual. *The Declaration on Nordic Language Policy*, issued in 2024 by the Nordic Council of Ministers, the official body for inter-governmental cooperation, lists the many languages of the Nordic region and the roles they each play, emphasising both the multilingualism of the area as a whole and of the individual countries:

> The languages in the Nordic region that can be used for official purposes, and which are essential to our societies, are Danish, Finnish, Faroese, Greenlandic, Icelandic, Norwegian (Bokmål and Nynorsk), the Sami languages, and Swedish, of which the Sami languages and Greenlandic are defined as indigenous languages. Due to their long-standing presence in the region, the following languages also have a special status as national minority languages: Meänkieli, Kven, Finnish, the Sami languages, Romani (Chib), Romanes, Yiddish, and

German. The Region is also home to the Nordic sign languages. Many new languages and, by extension, new mother tongues have come into play over the years due to immigration from other language areas. At school, all children and young people learn English and, to varying extents, other languages. (2024)

According to the Declaration, all these languages are equal even though they occupy different social roles. Policy differentiates between "languages essential to society", "indigenous languages", "national minority languages", "sign languages", and "new mother tongues" as well as "languages taught at school". The Declaration encourages the preservation and development of all these different types of languages within each individual country. At the same time, however, it urges the safeguarding of "the Nordic language community" founded on the mutual understandability of the Scandinavian languages. This community, so the Declaration argues, is essential for "the continued development of a shared Nordic identity and for promoting the Nordic region as the most integrated region in the world" (*ibidem*).

2. The Nordic Language Community

The Declaration thus stresses that the ability to communicate in one of the Scandinavian languages and understand the other two is important for people's identification with and sense of belonging to the Nordic region and for Nordic integration – e.g. the possibility to work, study and live anywhere in the area. In so doing, it reiterates the traditional shared view according to which common language skills tie the Nordic nations and their populations together. Both the official organs of Nordic cooperation (the Nordic Council, founded in 1952, and Nordic Council of Ministers, founded in 1971) and civil society actors such as the Nordic Associations have long considered the language community to be the basis of Nordic communality (Strang 2023, 27). As stated in the 2021 report *Does the Nordic Language Community Exist?* commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers and authored by Andrea Skjold Frøshaug and Truls Stende:

> Mutual comprehension of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish has facilitated communication, cross-border mobility and trust. The language community has been a crucial factor in the development of a closely integrated Nordic region and extensive Nordic co-operation. (2021, 6)

According to this view, the closeness of the Scandinavian languages plays a fundamental role in making the Nordic region unified, shaping a sense of cohesion and shared identity, and furthering collaboration across borders. At the same time, however, the fact that the report has an interrogative title, rather than an affirmative one, indicates that there may be a gap between what the Nordic Council of Ministers desires in terms of regional inhabitants' language skills and what those skills effectively are. The report, based on a survey asking more than 2000 young people about their comprehension and command of different languages with an emphasis on the Scandinavian ones, produced results that were not very encouraging for those convinced that the mutual intelligibility of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish forms the backbone of regional identity and cooperation.

Indeed, 95 percent of the survey's participants found English easy to understand, while 65 percent reported sometimes finding it easier to express themselves in English than in their native languages. In contrast, across the Nordic region as a whole, 62 percent found Norwegian and Swedish easy to understand while considerably fewer – 26 percent – stated that Danish is easy (Frøshaug and Stende 2021, 4-5).

Although two-thirds of the participants also agreed that understanding a Scandinavian language is important for the Nordic community, the report suggests that the mutual intelligibility

of Scandinavian languages faces serious challenges. The authors cited globalisation, the pervasive presence of English in fields such as popular culture and social media, and the tendency for national school systems to deprioritise efforts to foster knowledge of neighbouring languages and cultures as factors contributing to the decline of Scandinavian language comprehension in the Nordic region. While also outlining how to potentially counteract the negative consequences of these factors, the report paints a picture of cracks and fissures in the Nordic language community. In some countries, particularly in Greenland, Iceland and Finland, many young people find it quite difficult to understand one or more of the Scandinavian languages and thus prefer to use English when communicating with other youths in transnational encounters. In other settings, particularly in Norway and the Faroe Islands, on the other hand, young people generally have good Scandinavian language comprehension. Overall, the report identifies many differences across the Nordic region, divergences both in specific language skills and in views on the relative importance of speaking and understanding Scandinavian languages.

The results of the survey prompted Andrea Skjold Frøshaug and Truls Stende to examine whether weakened language skills could cause the Nordic region to fracture. They discussed the possible negative consequences of the current situation for Nordic integration, identity, and cooperation, but without reaching any definitive conclusion. At any rate, the authors emphasised that the survey results should give the Nordic Council of Ministers reason to scrutinise some of its most basic tenets, e.g., the belief that Danish, Norwegian and Swedish should be the official working languages of official Nordic cooperation.

3. Coherence and Fragmentation

Spurred by this gap between established policy, which urges the preservation and cultivation of the Nordic language community, and the actual language competences of many young people in the Nordic region, the editors of this volume organised the international conference *Coherence and Fragmentation: The Languages of the Nordic Countries and their Interrelations Today* at the University of Florence from 14 to 16 November 2024 to explore the multilingualism of the Nordic countries and in the region from various angles. The conference addressed not only the reported decline in receptive multilingualism, defined as "a mode of multilingual communication in which interactants employ a language and/or a language variety different from their partner's and still understand each other without the help of any additional lingua franca" (Rehbein, Thije and Verschik 2011, 248-49; Blees and Thije 2015, 2; Gooskens 2020, 770-71), but also the role of English, the relationship between majority and minority languages, endangered languages (such as the Sámi languages), translation flows, and literary multilingualism both in itself and in translation. The conference was supported by *Samarbejdsnævnet for Nordenundervisning i Udlandet* (SNU, The Coordinating Committee for Nordic Studies Abroad), a forum that promoted Nordic languages instruction as well as Nordic literatures and cultures at universities both within and outside the Nordic countries.[1]

The terms "coherence" and "fragmentation" may seem value-laden, as "coherence" is generally considered a more positive quality, while "fragmentation" implies destruction, isolation, and incommunicability. However, fragmentation can also point to the plurality and equality of languages foregrounded by the 2024 *Declaration*. Historically, official national language policies

[1] Unfortunately, SNU ended its activities in 2025 due to lack of support from the Nordic partners participating in the forum.

have repressed such plurality and equality. In Norway, for instance, "The Policy of Norwegianisation" (*fornorskingspolitikken*, ca. 1850-1980) sought to eliminate Sámi languages and culture (Minde 2005; Sanders 2017, 162-64) through an internal colonisation process – that is, via the violent imposition of the "monolingual paradigm" (Yildiz 2012, 2) that defined the nation as a monolingual entity. Viewed from this perspective, "coherence" no longer has simply positive meanings but begins to connote colonial fantasies of control, domination, homogenisation and assimilation in which differences are erased, and everybody is made to speak the same language.

It could also be argued that the plurality and equality of languages have been, and are perhaps to some extent still, obscured by official Nordic language politics. The Nordic language community is undoubtedly hierarchised, divided into a core area consisting of Scandinavia and Swedish-speaking Finland ("the primary linguistic community") and an outer circle where various other languages are spoken ("the secondary linguistic community", Vikør 2002, 112). For speakers of these other tongues, Danish, Norwegian or Swedish must first be acquired and mastered, and it is not self-evident that proficiency in one of the Scandinavian languages will also open the door to the other two. Indeed, Johan Strang tellingly prefers the term "Scandinavian language community" to "Nordic language community", thereby terminologically stressing that such community is the prerogative of only a subset of the entire population living in the Nordic region. As he observes: "For these language groups, the Scandinavian language community can constitute not merely a hurdle, but an instrument of distinction and discrimination that separates 'genuine' from 'less genuine' members of the Nordic community" (2023, 24). To date, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are the working languages of official Nordic cooperation; in recognition of the difficulty Finns and Icelanders face in accessing the Nordic language, however, simultaneous interpretation within the community to and from Finnish was introduced in 1977 and a few years later this practise was extended to also include Icelandic (37).

Even though Finland is geographically part of the Nordic region, its linguistic situation differs from the neighbouring countries in certain respects. Finland's two official languages are from different language families: mutual comprehension is thus much more difficult, if we exclude lexicon consisting of borrowings and loanwords. Finnish pupils are required to study the other domestic language (either Finnish or Swedish), but the mandatory teaching of Swedish has been under attack since the 1980s, particularly by nationalist groups (Väistö 2020). The Sámi languages are officially recognised as minority languages in Finland. However, despite significant improvements in recent decades, the relationship between the dominant culture and Sámi languages and culture is not equal. While Norway's assimilation policies were formally codified into law, Finland pursued a more indirect yet equally consequential approach (*settler colonialism*, Kuokkanen 2020). A central element of this process was the systematic marginalisation of Sámi languages, particularly up to the 1970s – marginalisation achieved by eliminating indigenous place names (Harley 2001) and establishing educational systems that favoured the national languages. As in other parts of Sápmi, the Sámi in Finland have borne the enduring consequences of externally imposed assimilation, rationalised by colonial narratives framing their language and culture as inferior (Lehtola 2022). In addition to Sámi, Finland – like the rest of the Nordic region – now hosts more migrant languages as well as English.

The Declaration on Nordic Language Policy counts the many languages in the Nordic area. Indeed, the region exhibits impressive linguistic diversity that transcends national borders. At the same time, this project of counting languages (see also Vikør 2002, 29-32) – which is undoubtedly highly important to linguistic minorities because it grants visibility and recognition to their languages – does not allow us to fully grasp how porous the borders between

languages are and leads us to disregard that the lives of many people, in the Nordic region as elsewhere, are multilingual. In literary research, multilingualism has become a flourishing independent research field during the last decades. In its many forms, the coincidence of multiple languages in a work of literature contests the notion "that a nation's and a culture's literature is best written and represented in one language" (Kauranen, Huss and Grönstrand 2019, 3), a notion that held sway for centuries and obscured the fact that multilingualism is a common aspect of literature rather than an exception.

This special issue of LEA contains five conference contributions, three of which are by keynote speakers.[2] They represent three of conference's key areas of focus: (i) receptive multilingualism, (ii) English in the Nordic countries, and (iii) literary multilingualism. We will here briefly contextualise the issue's contributions and present their main content.

4. Receptive Multilingualism

As a mode of interaction, receptive multilingualism is an alternative to other forms of cross-border communication, most notably the use of English as a lingua franca. It comes with certain benefits, particularly in terms of production. Charlotte Gooskens points out that "people can express themselves more easily and more precisely in their mother tongue than in a later acquired language" (2020, 771). This assumption, however, was challenged by *Does the Nordic Language Community Exist?* when the report showed that young people in some countries occasionally find it easier to express themselves in English than in their native tongue. In Denmark, for example, 70 percent of the respondents expressed this view. The report did not state whether this finding pertained to communication in general or specifically to cross-border communication within the Nordic region. Focusing on the latter, an earlier study from 2016 showed that young people are pragmatic when it comes to choosing a language. To reduce the risk of misunderstanding, they prefer English in formal and professional contexts whereas they opt for a Scandinavian language in more informal meetings such as coffee breaks and dinners. The choice of language thus depends on the given context (Brink 2016, 103-31).

In her article, Anja Schüppert, Associate Professor at the University of Groningen and one of the conference's keynote speakers, provides a synthesis of seven studies carried out in the framework of the Dutch research project "Linguistic determinants of mutual intelligibility in Scandinavian" in which she participated. Focusing on an important sub-question of the project, namely the asymmetrical intelligibility of spoken Danish and Swedish, her article summarises the research she and her colleagues conducted to investigate the origins of this phenomenon.

Danish and Swedish are the "problem children" of the Nordic language community. A 2012-13 study showed that young Danes and Swedes living in the region around Malmö and Copenhagen have difficulties in understanding one another: given these findings, the study's authors suggested that Danish and Swedish should perhaps no longer be considered *nabosprog* (neighbouring languages) that people can be expected to understand but rather *fremmedsprog* (foreign languages) that are easy to learn (Bacquin and Zola Christensen 2013).

The asymmetrical intelligibility of Danish and Swedish has been confirmed by numerous studies. *Does the Nordic Language Community Exist?* revealed that less than half of young Danes – 40 percent – find Swedish easy to understand, while only just over 20 percent of Swedes find

[2] Eleven other articles from the conference have been published in the special section of *Studi Finno-Ugrici* (2025): "Coherence and Fragmentation. The Languages of the Nordic Countries and Their Interrelations Today" <https://serena.sharepress.it/studifinno/issue/view/872> (01/2026).

it easy to understand Danish (24, 26). This relatively low degree of mutual comprehension between Danish and Swedish and the fact that it is asymmetrical indicate a weakness in the Nordic language community. Still, why do Danes find it easier to decode spoken Swedish than vice versa?

Schüppert's studies investigated both extra-linguistic and language-inherent factors that might be responsible for this asymmetry in mutual understanding. They showed that language attitudes, i.e., the attitude a listener holds towards a language, only explain the variance in intelligibility to a very small degree. Therefore, ideological barriers (negative attitudes and prejudices) are not primarily responsible for creating this asymmetry. Instead, Schüppert's research indicates that the main cause of asymmetry is the phonetic features differentiating the two languages. Spoken Danish has a higher articulation rate and a more significant level of syllable reduction than spoken Swedish. At the same time, Danish orthography is very conservative and corresponds only partially to present-day pronunciation. When Danes encounter cognate Swedish words, i.e. "historically related words in the vocabularies of the two languages" (Gooskens and van Heuven 2021), they rely on their native orthography to understand them. Due to the developments in spoken Danish, Swedes are unable to do so. Danish-Swedish mutual intelligibility is symmetrical in young children and only becomes asymmetrical in the period when children begin attending school. This indicates, Schüppert concludes, that "as Danish schoolchildren become literate, they can start to make use of their native orthography when listening to spoken Swedish, and as adults, their orthographic knowledge helps them to bridge the pronunciation gaps more efficiently than vice versa" (*infra*, 31). In other terms, Danish listeners often succeed in accurately understanding a Swedish word, owing to the similarity between the Swedish pronunciation and the Danish written form.

This monographic issue of LEA also presents another article focusing on receptive multilingualism in the Nordic region, but in this case viewed from a European vantage point. In many Nordic studies programmes outside Scandinavia, students choose to specialise in either Danish, Norwegian or Swedish as part of their degree. At the same time, they are encouraged to learn the other two languages, at least passively, for both cultural and historical reasons – to be able to access texts written in all three languages – and to improve their prospects for employment. And yet, what are the challenges of teaching receptive multilingualism in a non-Scandinavian environment and to students who do not have one of the Scandinavian languages as their first language?

In her article, Sarah Harchaoui, Associate Professor at the Sorbonne University, focuses on teaching Scandinavian mutual intelligibility to French-speaking students. The article is based on a survey she conducted in 2022 with seven BA students who had specialised in Norwegian and taken a one-year course titled "intercompréhension nordique" as part of their degree programme. The primary course objective was to help students identify the three languages – Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish – in both spoken and written form, to recognise the linguistic features separating them, and to understand the general meaning of texts and speech in all three languages. "It was not a course in learning a new language per se," Harchaoui writes, "but rather a course in accessing new linguistic material through previously acquired knowledge" (*infra*, 41).

Based on the students' feedback, the author emphasises that courses in receptive multilingualism need to address both linguistic and ideological aspects of understanding across language barriers. Students should not only be exposed to and learn to cope with linguistic variation in both written and oral forms; they should also be encouraged to reflect on their own linguistic habits and backgrounds, along with wider ideological factors – such as French monolingual ideology – that influence their views on linguistic variation. Such an approach, the author

argues, fosters greater awareness of and sensitivity to variation and helps learners develop the linguistic flexibility necessary to enable comprehension across languages. Teaching receptive multilingualism is thus different from teaching a specific language. Rather than relying on prescriptive norms and linear models of acquisition, Harchaoui writes, teachers should "cultivate metalinguistic insight, promote openness to variation, and embrace the dynamic nature of understanding across closely related languages" (*infra*, 49). One can only hope that, in the long run, experimental courses such as this will lead to the development of relevant didactic materials for Scandinavian language students outside of the Nordic region.

5. English in the Nordic Countries

Only a small portion of the overall population of the Nordic region have English as their mother tongue. For most Nordic citizens, English is an additional language, "a language acquired alongside or subsequent to the mother tongue(s)" (Peterson and Fägersten 2023, 1). Furthermore, English has no official status in any of the Nordic countries (Mortensen 2023, 104).

The Declaration on Nordic Language Policy states that all children and young people in the Nordic area should "learn English and, to varying extents, other languages". It is important to learn English, the Declaration continues, because it is "vital that we in the Nordic region have a solid grasp of languages used in international contexts". According to this official language policy, English is taught at school and learned by pupils and students because it is the language used in international interactions. However, extensive research shows that English has a very prominent status in the Nordic countries today. It is used not only in trade and international communication, but also among the inhabitants of the Nordic countries themselves. Having infiltrated both high- and low-status domains, it can no longer be considered a foreign language; instead, it is transitioning to the status of a second language (Gottlieb 2023, 2). It has also been called "an everyday language" in the Nordic countries (Lønsmann *et al*. 2024, 99).

According to Kristy Beers Fägersten, there are four reasons why the Scandinavians know English at such an advanced level: 1) lexical similarities between English and most Nordic languages, 2) early inclusion of English instruction in schools, 3) undubbed English-language popular culture products, and 4) an openness to learning and using English (2023, 70). The author suggests that these causes overlap and mutually support each other, but it is primarily exposure to and consumption of Anglophone popular culture that is responsible for the high levels of English proficiency documented among the Nordic populations. English is included in primary school curricula starting as early as first grade, but children are also exposed to undubbed English-language popular culture outside of the classroom – through cartoons, films, pop music, computer games, television programmes, YouTube videos etc. – and this effectively kickstarts their acquisition process (*ibidem*). Young people in the Nordic countries often consider popular culture a more important source for learning English than the formal educational system.

Fägersten points out that English has progressed from a source for lexical borrowing to "a valid, viable code for (inter- and intra-) Nordic communication, especially among younger generations" (74). In fact, fully gauging the extent to which English has permeated the Nordic societies and languages requires an examination of code-switching, i.e., the use of more than one language in social conversations or in any conversation between two or more people (Mabule 2019). There is ample proof that language usage is evolving in the form of frequent code-switches to English, with English-language popular culture providing a ready-made input. Citing a 2001 study by Harriet Sharp, Fägersten mentions that switching to English is predominantly characterised by 1) the incorporation of idioms, formulaic language, or other

simple phrases, and 2) the citation of popular culture sources (2023, 74). As an example of the former, Renée Höglin found Swedish-English code switching among young people in informal conversation to be characterised by fixed phrases such as "Shit happens", "Back to basics", or "No problem" (Höglin 2002, 56 quoted in *ibidem*; see also Gottlieb in this volume). When citing popular culture sources, on the other hand, the interlocutors build a sense of solidarity and shared intertextual identity among themselves by signalling their common knowledge of these sources. However, while it is true that many citizens of the Nordic countries speak English, proficiency levels and people's relative degree of comfort speaking English vary widely depending on a complex range of individual and social factors. Some people, particularly older citizens, have a more distanced relationship with English than younger generations (Peterson and Sippola 2022).

At the same time, however, it is also important to note that English has become a part of the linguistic landscape in the Nordic countries because of wider economic, political and technological transformations. The scholars behind the sociolinguistic research project *English and Globalisation in Denmark: A Changing Sociolinguistic Landscape* (2021-25) stress that English use in Denmark is closely tied to certain historical phenomena. At their core, such phenomena are not actually language-related. For instance, they include among the events favouring the integration of English into daily life in Denmark, British colonial history, America's military power in the 20th century, the spread of pop and youth culture in the 1960s, the EU principle of workers' free movement, the end of the state monopoly on television and introduction of commercial channels, the launch of the Internet, and the revolution in communication habits sparked by the introduction of smartphones in the early 2000s (Lønsmann *et al*. 2024, 101). Being closely tied to these massive changes, English use is not a phenomenon that can be easily regulated or eliminated. If the development of Danish society continues along the same pathways as in the last century, English will continue to be important. The scholars behind this project argue that, in practice, Denmark is a bilingual society where both Danish and English play prominent roles for most people (99). To ensure the democratic inclusion of the still-growing number of international workers who live in Denmark but are not proficient in Danish, they furthermore suggest policymakers begin assessing whether to introduce English use in local politics or associations (113-14). In the context of relations between the Nordic languages, English is sometimes also seen as a democratic, "neutral" language of inclusion. In Greenland, for example, Johan Strang suggests that English could have "the democratizing effect of overcoming the binary tension between Greenlandic and Danish languages in the construction of a new post-postcolonial Greenlandic identity" (2023, 32).

Not all the Nordic countries have embraced English to a similar degree, however. Whereas attitudes towards English-language popular culture are generally positive, some Nordic countries are clearly more wary of English influence than others, fearing the invasion of English loanwords and resulting domain losses. Focusing on loanwords, Lars Vikør distinguishes between countries characterised by linguistic purism and linguistic liberalism, respectively. He finds that Iceland and the Faroe Islands are the most purist, whereas Sweden and Denmark are the most liberal language communities (Vikør 2010, 27). For their part, Tore Kristiansen and Helge Sandøy (2010, 157) stress that both structural forces (linguistic similarity to vs. difference from English) and ideological forces (rooted in sociohistorical relationships of domination vs. subordination) shape Nordic differences in tolerance towards imports. Specifically, the countries whose languages are most similar to English and that have historically also dominated the Nordic region are the most open to English.

This issue presents two articles exploring the influence of English on the Nordic languages. The first is authored by Henrik Gottlieb, Emeritus Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen and one of the conference's keynote speakers. Gottlieb uses his extensive research in "Anglicisms" – defined by the author as "any individual or systemic language feature adapted or adopted from English, or inspired or boosted by English models, used in intralingual communication in a speech community in which English is not the home language" (2020, 32) – to explore whether English influence will cause the Scandinavian languages to slide further away from each other and thereby lead to another fracture in the Nordic language community.

Relying solely on standard Scandinavian Anglicisms dictionaries, published in the 1990s or early 2000s and employing different criteria for including or excluding entries, it appears that the three Scandinavian languages differ significantly. Gottlieb, however, quantifies and evaluates English's contemporary influence on Danish, Swedish and Norwegian by exploring large contemporary text corpora to find that this influence supports convergence among the languages. In other words, considering the English influence to which they are exposed, the relationship between the Scandinavian languages is one of coherence rather than fragmentation. As such, English loanwords might help Scandinavians understand each other even if they each speak their own native language. As the author writes: "Using recognisable (whether visible or invisible) Anglicisms, typically content words or expressions with emotional power, young and old Scandinavians may continue to communicate without resorting to 'real' English" (*infra*, 71). This forecast is rather encouraging for those who deem the Nordic language community important.

The second article exploring the influence of English is written by Sofia Stolt and Jannika Lassus, a Lecturer at Hanken School of Economics and a senior University Lecturer at the University of Helsinki, respectively. Both authors also serve as members of the Matriculation Examination Board where they represent Swedish as a native language. This board is responsible for managing and administering the national matriculation examination in Finland. This examination is what is known as a high-stakes exam, i.e. one that forms the basis for admission to higher education. In their article, they give a corpus-based overview of traces of foreign-language influence in the essays written for the mandatory test in Mother Tongue and Literature by L1 speakers of Swedish. The test aims to measure the extent to which the examinees have achieved the objectives set out in the upper-secondary school curriculum and thus achieved maturity and readiness for further studies. Stolt and Lassus' study shows that the students are poised between the local and the global. Swedish in Finland is tied to the standard norms of Swedish, but the country's Swedish speakers are simultaneously surrounded by a Finnish-speaking majority and part of a global digital English-speaking environment. This reality is mirrored in the essays. Even in high-stakes exams with strong demands of normative language use, many of the essays show the influence of foreign languages, especially English, e.g., in the form of English spellings. While the content of these essays is comprehensibile, the texts receive lower marks because the language used is not considered standard Swedish.

The authors pose the important question of whether students know how to keep the languages separate, i.e. whether they use influences from foreign languages consciously, or whether language mixing is something they cannot refrain from using – a fact which would indicate a possible language change in the written language. In any case, Stolt and Lassus stress the need to consciously preserve the L1 even though today's society encourages multilingualism: "Actively using a standard variety of one's mother tongue is one way to preserve it, and that requires knowledge of the language", the authors write (*infra*, 84). To acquire such knowledge of the language, however, students must be exposed to text and media in the standard language as well as role models who use the language according to the established norms.

6. Literary Multilingualism

As Julia Tidigs and Helena Bodin point out, literary multilingualism is both a strategy and a concept. It is the strategy necessarily used by multilingual literature but it is also a broad and multifaceted concept in literary studies. The concept applies to texts written in two or more languages (including texts alternating standard language and dialectal variation), texts thematising and representing multilingualism without being necessarily written in more than one language, authors who write in two or more languages, and countries that have literary traditions in different languages (2020, 144).

Multilingualism is ubiquitous in the everyday life of many people and has been important throughout Western literary history (Rossich 2018, 50). Until recently, however, it has been obscured by what Yasemin Yildiz has famously dubbed the "monolingual paradigm", i.e., the set of beliefs according to which monolingualism is the natural norm and individuals have only one "true" language, their "mother tongue", which is in turn associated with a single national identity (Yildiz 2012, 2). The monolingual paradigm first emerged in late eighteenth-century Europe and has had a pervasive influence on the construction and perception of individuals, disciplines, institutions, literatures, cultures and nations. However, as Yildiz points out, there are signs that the tide is changing. Since the 1990s, multilingual practices in literature, the arts, and daily life have garnered growing public and academic interest; at the same time, however, such interest cannot be fully comprehended without also acknowledging monolingualism as the historically specific influence that still frames and shapes our interpretations of these practices (3-4). Today's positive attention to literary multilingualism has generated many new research threads. These include rediscovering and reevaluating writers who produced work in several languages, efforts to partially rewrite national literary histories, and an expanding interest in exile literature, migration literature and literature from and about border regions, e.g., Southern Schleswig which is home to a Danish-speaking minority (Friedrichsen and Sandberg 2025, 5).

In the Nordic countries, literary multilingualism studies have developed significantly in the last decade (see e.g. Kauranen, Huss and Grönstrand 2019, 3-23). One of the most prominent scholars in this field is Julia Tidigs, University Lecturer at the University of Helsinki. Tidigs has published widely on literary multilingualism and theoretical approaches to studying this phenomenon and was one of the conference's keynote speakers. She contributes to this volume with an article on the Swedish author Johanna Frid's debut novel *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* (Nora or Burn Oslo burn), a novel that won Frid the Dagens Nyheter Culture Prize in 2019. Tidigs's article exemplifies the way literary multilingualism studies have shifted from focusing on multilingualism as primarily a textual quality impacting how characters are portrayed, milieus depicted, and themes developed, for example, to multilingualism as the result of interactions between the text and its readers. This new strand of research does not operate with a notion of an ideal reader who is fully linguistically competent and able to understand all the different languages or language varieties present in the text. Rather, it envisions readers in the plural, stressing that different readers – or even the same reader at different points in time – will interact with the text in different ways (Tidigs 2019, 225). In encountering multilingual texts readers are called to draw and dissolve the linguistic borders between languages. Readers do not consume multilingual texts passively; rather, they actively participate as co-creators of multilingualism.

Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn, a work of autofiction, is about the complicated relationship between the young Swedish woman Johanna and her Danish boyfriend Emil. There is, however, a third partner in the relationship, or so Johanna suspects – Emil's ex-girlfriend, the beautiful Norwegian Nora, whom the narrator and protagonist Johanna never meets in person but compul-

sively stalks on the internet. Johanna feels inferior to Nora, considering the Norwegian woman a paragon of perfection, and her sense of inadequacy only deepens when she discovers that she suffers from endometriosis, a painful and debilitating disease affecting ten percent of all fertile women.

As Tidigs shows, the troubled dynamics of borders – their creation, transgression and permeability – is the central organising axis of the novel; it is the unifying principle that ties together what might otherwise seem to be very different thematic threads. On a thematic level, the novel foregrounds the many failures of receptive multilingualism in Scandinavia, with Johanna having more trouble with Danish than Emil has with Swedish – in other words, the lovers embody the typical asymmetry in mutual intelligibility between Danish and Swedish discussed by Schüppert. However, what the novel *says* about language is one thing – what it *does* in praxis is quite another. Not only does it alternate between languages, with Emil's utterances rendered in Danish, but it also allows borders to collapse by mixing languages so that Danish and Norwegian "penetrate" the narrator's Swedish.[3] In this way, as Tidigs observes, "the novel simultaneously exposes its readers to Scandinavian languages, presupposing intercomprehension […] or, at least, tolerance of being put in a position of partial fluency" (*infra*, 98). The untranslated multilingualism of the text places the reader in a position similar to that of the narrator-protagonist. By exposing readers to the neighbouring languages, Tidigs suggests, the novel not only invites them to learn these languages (or at least elements of them) but also and importantly offers them a first-hand taste of unfamiliarity and semi-comprehension, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the novel: "*Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* reinforces literature's ability to not only inform or represent but also to *enact* and allow readers to *experience* such crucial questions as those of linguistic and corporeal borders," Tidigs concludes (*infra*, 100).

As we have hopefully shown, the Nordic region offers a compelling study in both coherence and fragmentation. On the one hand, the languages of the Nordic countries exhibit remarkable coherence fuelled not only by their common origins but also by centuries of cultural exchange and shared political narratives. On the other hand, the region also features linguistic fragmentation due to, for example, political borders and the pressures of globalisation. Coherence persists in the Nordic region through shared communicative norms, institutional frameworks, and traditions of mutual intelligibility even as processes of diversification continue at individual and societal levels. Fragmentation in this sense entails not the breakdown of a once unified system but rather the proliferation of voices and perspectives within an increasingly complex linguistic landscape.

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[3] Apparently, while the Swedish text does not translate features of Danish and Norwegian, Nanna Lund, the Danish translator of Frid's novel (or her editor) did not believe that Danish readers would be able to grasp unadulterated Swedish passages. In the Danish translation, therefore, the main text is in Danish while Johanna's lines of dialogue are in Swedish. However, these lines were translated into Danish in an appendix to the novel (see Frid 2019, 188-96).

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Firenze University Press
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OPEN ACCESS

Citation: A. Schüppert (2026) Inter-Nordic Communication: The Role of Extra-linguistic and Language-Inherent Features for the Mutual Intelligibility of Spoken Danish and Swedish. "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: pp. 21-33. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-17206.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Inter-Nordic Communication: The Role of Extra-linguistic and Language-inherent Features for the Mutual Intelligibility of Spoken Danish and Swedish

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Abstract

This article explores how linguistic and extra-linguistic factors contribute to the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility between spoken Danish and Swedish. Positive language attitudes were found to correlate with higher intelligibility, although causality remains unclear. As the asymmetry turned out not to be present in illiterate pre-schoolers, orthography and spoken language reduction appear to play major roles: Danish speakers benefit more from orthographic cues when decoding spoken Swedish than vice versa. Overall, changes in Danish pronunciation, faster articulation, and conservative spelling combine to reduce intelligibility for Swedish listeners more than the other way around.

Keywords: Danish, Inter-Scandinavian Communication, Mutual Intelligibility, Norwegian, Swedish

Introduction

This article summarises separately published studies conducted within the framework of the project *Linguistic Determinants of Mutual Intelligibility in Scandinavia* funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The three mainland Scandinavian languages Danish, Norwegian and Swedish have a reputation of being mutually intelligible, which means that the speakers are able to communicate each using their native language. However, in daily practice, inter-Scandinavian communication sometimes fails. Results from previous studies have shown that especially Danes and Swedes have difficulties understanding each other's languages. While the aim of the overall NWO-funded project

was to measure communicatively relevant linguistic distances among the spoken Scandinavian languages and to develop a model that explains mutual intelligibility in Scandinavia on the basis of these measurements, the current synthesis is the first to focus on one of the larger sub-questions within the project, i.e. the asymmetric intelligibility of spoken Danish and Swedish, and to summarise studies that were conducted to explore the origin of this asymmetry.

The Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and their associated territories Åland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, share historical events and cultural and political norms. They have co-operated officially in the Nordic Council since 1952 and in the Nordic Council of Ministers since 1971. Both authorities have strongly promoted inter-Nordic collaboration, among other things by emphasising the importance of using Nordic languages in inter-Nordic communication situations rather than English as a lingua franca. The Nordic Language Convention, signed in 1981, ensures that citizens of the Nordic countries are entitled to use their native language in written communication with authorities. As recently as in 2024, *The Declaration of Nordic Language Policy* was signed, which aims at ensuring that citizens of the Nordic countries can communicate in at least one Scandinavian language and have knowledge of the others, so that they can be part of the Nordic language community. Particularly within mainland Scandinavia, i.e. the countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden, communicating across linguistic borders using the language of the speaker has been a longstanding tradition strongly encouraged by the authorities: for many centuries, Danes, Norwegians and Swedes have used their native languages when communicating with each other. This manner of communication has been called "Receptive bilingualism" by Hockett (1958) and "Semicommunication" by Haugen (1966).

Einar Haugen was the first researcher to investigate the mutual intelligibility of mainland Scandinavian languages. In his pioneering study, published in 1953, he elicited data on inter-Scandinavian communication patterns by reaching out to inhabitants of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden by phone, and establishing how much of the neighbouring language they thought they could understand. By this, he elicited self-reported intelligibility of the neighbouring languages, and, notably, only from those that already had a telephone connection at that time. Haugen (1953) reported promising intelligibility scores for most of the six communication situations (Danish in Norway and Sweden, Norwegian in Denmark and Sweden, and Swedish in Denmark and Norway), as self-reported intelligibility was above 80% for four of the language pairs. However, communication between Danes and Swedes seemed to be problematic. More specifically, only 56% of the Danish participants in his study reported to comprehend spoken Swedish, while 54% of the Swedish participants reported to comprehend spoken Danish. Haugen's 1953 publication was written in Norwegian, but 13 years later, he published his findings in English as Haugen (1966). Haugen's (1953; 1966) seminal study was the first to document communication patterns (or rather, self-reports) in Scandinavia of the early 1950s. In the 1970s, shorter papers were published dealing with linguistic influence between the mainland Scandinavian languages, such as Bergman's *Svenska lån från danskan, norskan och finskan* (1971; Swedish Loan Words from Danish, Norwegian and Finnish), Karker's *Om svensk og norsk indflydelse på moderne dansk* (1971; On Swedish and Norwegian Influence on Contemporary Danish) and Lindegård Hjorth's *Nabosprogene i den højere danske skole* (1972; Neighbouring Languages in the Danish High School), but it took a decade before the topic of mutual intelligibility of mainland Scandinavian languages was investigated empirically again, this time by Maurud (1976). In contrast to Haugen, who based his study on the participants' self-reported comprehension abilities, Maurud conducted an investigation to assess exactly how much of their neighbouring languages Danes, Norwegians

and Swedes could understand. He did so by presenting listeners from the three capital cities Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm with the neighbouring languages in a translation task. In this study, the highest intelligibility scores for spoken language were achieved by Norwegians listening to Swedish, while the lowest scores were again obtained by Swedish participants confronted with Danish. Maurud thus confirmed Haugen's findings that Danes and Swedes encountered the biggest problems when communicating with each other. Interestingly, Danes comprehended more spoken Swedish (43%) than vice versa (23%).

One of the major criticisms of Maurud's investigation, however, has been the fact that he compared the intelligibility of Swedish among Danes in Copenhagen to the intelligibility of Danish among Swedes in Stockholm (Gregersen 2004). While Copenhagen is located only 30 kilometres from the Swedish border, Stockholm is located about 570 kilometres from the Danish border, which means that there is a substantial geographical asymmetry in the data. This geographical asymmetry can be assumed to be linked to the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility of spoken Danish and Swedish, reported by Maurud. Arguably, closer proximity facilitates trips to the neighbouring country and, likewise, more contact with visitors from the neighbouring country, as well as easier access to radio and television in these pre-internet times. While people living in Copenhagen in the 1970s were within reach of Swedish television and could easily visit the neighbouring country, people living in Stockholm could neither watch nor listen to Danish broadcast programmes, nor could they cross the border to Denmark within a couple of hours. However, Maurud's conclusion was that "Swedes' low understanding of the neighbour languages is a sign that the habit of hearing them and the attitude towards the need for understanding them are of major importance for the Scandinavians' ability to communicate with each other in their respective languages" (Maurud 1976, 71), thereby suggesting that attitudes towards a specific language held by the listener are linked to the listener's intelligibility of that language.

The asymmetric intelligibility between Danish and Swedish has been confirmed in studies by Bø (1978), Börestam Uhlmann (1991) and Delsing and Lundin-Åkesson (2005). Bø presented evidence in favour of the hypothesis and reported that access to broadcast programmes in the neighbouring language enhances intelligibility of that language. Delsing and Lundin-Åkesson concluded that contact as well as language attitudes correlate with intelligibility. Interestingly, however, the consistently reported asymmetry between Danish and Swedish is much less prevalent in written language compared to spoken language (Maurud 1976; Bø 1978; Lundin and Zola Christensen 2001; Delsing and Lundin-Åkesson 2005). This suggests that the asymmetry in spoken language is also linked to speech-related features. Danish and Swedish differ in a number of linguistic features such as vowel space (Disner 1978) and some suprasegmental features such as the Danish laryngeal phenomenon "stød" and the Swedish tone accents, to name just a few. These and other linguistic factors might also play a role for the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility. To further investigate this asymmetry, a research team at the Center for Language and Cognition Groningen (CLCG), consisting of Charlotte Gooskens, Nanna H. Hilton and the author of this article, conducted a series of experiments. Here, I summarise seven of these studies.

1. The Role of Language Attitudes for the Mutual Intelligibility of Danish and Swedish

One of our first studies (Schüppert and Gooskens 2011) explored the role of language attitudes, thereby picking up the assumption by Maurud (1976) that the attitude that a listener holds towards a language is linked to the ability to decode that language. We were not only interested in a potential correlation between the attitude towards the neighbouring language

and the intelligibility of that language, but also in potential differences across age groups. We therefore designed a picture-pointing task that was suitable for very young children. Participants were 19 Danish-speaking and 27 Swedish-speaking pre-schoolers between 3 and 6 years of age, as well as 21 Danish-speaking and 19 Swedish-speaking adolescents aged 17 to 20. In this study, 50 highly frequent Danish-Swedish cognate nouns (e.g. Danish "hoved" and Swedish "huvud"; English "head") were presented auditorily in randomised order. With every noun, four pictures appeared on a touch screen in front of the participant. Participants were instructed to choose the correct picture as quickly as they could by pointing to it on the touch screen. Accuracy and reaction times (RTs) to correct identifications were measured for every item and every participant. After the experiment, we asked participants to indicate if the language they had heard sounded more beautiful, less beautiful, or as beautiful as their native language. These three categories were later coded as 3, 1, and 2 points, respectively.

First of all, not surprisingly, the results showed that the adolescents outperformed the children both with respect to accuracy and reaction times. Interestingly, we found no significant difference between the accuracy scores by Danish-speaking versus Swedish-speaking children, which seems to suggest that the asymmetry reported by previous studies only develops later in life. To our surprise, however, we also found no significant difference in accuracy scores in the adolescents' data, but a closer look at the data revealed that this might have been due to a ceiling effect, which is probably a consequence of having designed a task for very young children in the first place. All Danish and 89% of the Swedish participants scored 90% or higher, which means that there is too little variation in the data to find meaningful effects, such as a language effect (Danish versus Swedish adult listeners).

As expected, the pattern was different for reaction times: while Danish-speaking and Swedish-speaking children performed comparably (i.e. the RTs were symmetrical), the Danish-speaking adolescents were significantly faster in choosing the correct picture for the Swedish noun, than vice versa. Interestingly, a similar pattern was found for the attitude that participants held towards the neighbouring language: while the children held symmetric attitudes towards the neighbouring language, Danish adolescents held a significantly more positive attitude towards spoken Swedish than vice versa. Importantly, however, we found no significant correlation between attitude and intelligibility. In other words, while the group of Danish adolescents was faster in recognising Swedish words, and generally held a more positive attitude towards Swedish than vice versa, it was not the case that individuals with a positive attitude were faster, and those with a negative attitude were slower.

We therefore set out to explore the origins of these two asymmetries in a follow-up study, which was published as Schüppert, Hilton and Gooskens (2015). For this study, we collected additional data using the same picture-pointing task as in the 2011 study. This time, 86 Danish-speaking and 68 Swedish-speaking children aged 7 to 16 participated in the task, thus filling the age gap that our first study left. In addition, we collected their attitudes through a more sophisticated measure by using a matched-guise paradigm (see Lambert *et al.* 1960). For this, we recorded five bilingual speakers, who all read aloud a short story in two languages, respectively. Importantly, one of the five bilingual speakers was a female Danish-Swedish bilingual,[1] while other languages included were Dutch (several speakers), Frisian, German, Finnish, Norwegian, and Indonesian. As usual in the matched-guise paradigm, the participants were under the assumption that the ten short-story fragments were recorded by ten different speakers reading one

[1] This speaker had been selected through a so-called voice parade with Danish and Swedish native speakers, who affirmed that the speaker sounded native-like in both languages (for details, see Schüppert, Hilton and Gooskens 2015).

fragment (rather than five speakers each reading two fragments). The critical data we wanted to collect were the ratings of the bilingual Danish/Swedish speaker, while the other languages only served as fillers, to guise the fact that the participants listened to the same speaker twice (i.e. once in Danish and once in Swedish). The participants were asked to rate each of the "ten" speakers with respect to six personality traits that have been employed in previous matched-guise studies: strange/normal, ugly/beautiful, dumb/smart, unfriendly/friendly, poor/rich, and old-fashioned/modern. We conducted a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to reduce this data, and found that the first five personality traits correlated to such an extent that they could be represented by one component, which we called "attractiveness". The last trait did not correlate sufficiently with the rest and was therefore extracted as a separate component, which we called "modernity".[2] In the next step, we found that the "attractiveness" of the bilingual speaker when she spoke Swedish was higher than when she spoke Danish, which confirmed our results from the 2011 study. Furthermore, when it came to the picture-pointing task, we found that mutual intelligibility increased with age. In this study we found a low, but significant correlation (r = .19, df = 114, p = .04) between attitude towards the neighbouring language and the ability to decode that language. This only explained 3.6% of the variance, indicating that there are far more important factors for the mutual intelligibility of Danish and Swedish among schoolchildren than language attitude. Importantly, the causality is difficult to establish. It might be the case that listeners hold more positive attitudes when they comprehend the neighbouring language better, but it is also possible that a positive attitude leads to a greater motivation to comprehend.

A concern of this study was that it is likely that the participants recognised the neighbouring language, and therefore rated the bilingual speaker according to common prejudices in the Nordic countries: Swedish is melodic and beautiful, while Danish is a monotonous and indistinctly articulated language, which is hard to grasp. This would be in line with findings reported by Kristiansen (2017), which showed that typically Swedes rate Swedish more beautiful than Danes rate Danish, and that Danes rate Swedish more beautiful than Swedes rate Danish, and that this pattern has not changed substantially between 2001 and 2014.

In a follow-up paper (Gooskens, Hilton and Schüppert 2016), therefore, we investigated if listeners who are less familiar with Danish and Swedish and hold fewer prejudices towards the languages show similar patterns to those observed in our 2015 study. For the 2016 study, we replicated the matched-guise part (but not the picture-pointing task) with 73 German-speaking and 141 Mandarin-speaking participants. For both groups of participants, we ran separate PCAs, which resulted in slightly different components: from the German data, two components representing "attractiveness" and "success" were extracted, and the Mandarin data were represented by a single component representing "attractiveness". Again, in the next step, we found that the German speakers rated the bilingual speaker significantly more attractive and more successful when she spoke Swedish than when she spoke Danish, and, surprisingly, even the Mandarin-speaking participants rated her more attractive overall when she spoke Swedish. As Mandarin is a tone language, we were wondering if the Chinese listeners rated the bilingual speaker more positively when she spoke Swedish, because unlike Danish, Swedish is a pitch-accent language. Tone languages and pitch-accent languages share the feature that pitch patterns can carry lexical meaning, and therefore they require extra attention to intonation. Therefore, in another follow-up study (Hilton *et al.* 2022), we replicated the study once more with highly artificial audio material: the speech samples from all ten speakers, among which

[2] For details of this analysis see Schüppert, Hilton and Gooskens 2015.

the bilingual Danish-Swedish speaker, were monotonised. We collected data from further 316 Mandarin-speaking participants and this time found no significant difference in ratings. This seems to confirm our hypothesis that speakers of Mandarin may prefer pitch-accent languages such as Swedish over stress languages such as Danish, and this may be equally true for speakers of Scandinavian languages. However, it has proven to be difficult to tease apart extra-linguistic factors, such as stereotypical beliefs about the languages involved, from language-inherent features such as intonation. To sum up, we found that Swedish sounds more attractive to adult listeners from various linguistic backgrounds, and there is evidence that this is partially due to differences in Danish and Swedish intonation.

2. The Role of Linguistic Factors for the Mutual Intelligibility of Danish and Swedish

In addition to investigating such extra-linguistic factors, we also conducted a series of studies that focused on the role of language-inherent features for the reported (adult) asymmetry in mutual intelligibility between spoken Danish and Swedish. Danish and Swedish both originally stem from East Old Norse, but have undergone different linguistic processes since then, most notably with respect to pronunciation. Schwa-assimilation and the vocalisation of consonants are well-documented phenomena in Danish (Basbøll 2005; Grønnum 1998 and 2007). While phonological reduction is a characteristic of colloquial language use in most languages (in English, e.g. [fɛb.jə.ɹi] or even [fɛb.ɹi] for /fɛb.ɹu.ɛ.ɹi/ for the word spelled <february>), it seems that such processes may occur with different frequencies across languages. In Hilton, Gooskens and Schüppert (2011), we explored if the degree of reduction indeed differs structurally between Danish and Swedish. To do so, we analysed highly comparable speech samples, i.e. radio news aired on the national broadcasting stations Danmarks Radio (DR) and Sveriges Radio (SR). In addition, we included radio news from Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK). Snippets of ca. 20-40 seconds from 19 Danish speakers, 18 Norwegian speakers, and 18 Swedish speakers were transcribed orthographically, and the number of canonical syllables was defined for each snippet using the pronunciation dictionaries published by Molbæk Hansen (1990) for Danish, Berulfsen (1969) for Norwegian, and Hedelin (1997) for Swedish. According to these, for instance, Danish <hoved>, Norwegian <hode>, and Swedish <huvud> all have two canonical syllables, independent of how they are actually pronounced by a certain speaker and in a certain context. Pauses of more than 150 milliseconds were removed from the samples, and from the number of canonical syllables per speaker, we calculated each speaker's "canonical articulation rate" (i.e. the number of canonical syllables per second) to normalise for the differences in sample length. In a next step, we used a Praat script developed by De Jong and Wempe (2009) to establish the number of phonetic syllables per snippet. Here, phonetic syllables were defined as intensity peaks in the speech signal that have voicing. Intensity peaks were defined as being at least 2 dB louder than the preceding and following parts of the signal. This means that while the number of canonical syllables per word is a stable measure, the number of phonetic syllables is sensitive to the speaker's actual articulation, which may partly depend on the linguistic context in which a word is pronounced, but also on individual differences, and, importantly, on language-specific peculiarities. Again, just as for canonical articulation rate, we normalised for the differences in sample length, and defined phonetic articulation rate as the number of phonetic syllables per second for every speaker and language. The canonical and the phonetic articulation rates were then analysed.

We found that phonetic articulation rate was highly comparable across the three languages: on average, the 19 Danish and the 18 Norwegian news readers produced 4.4 phonetic syllables

per second, while the 18 Swedish news readers produced 4.5 phonetic syllables per second. In other words, the purely acoustic input is very similar across the three languages. When it came to the canonical articulation rate, the pattern was different: while the Norwegian and Swedish news readers produced 5.4 canonical syllables per second, the Danish news readers produced 6.2 canonical syllables per second. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that this difference is highly significant. This indicates two important findings. (1) First of all, as expected, all three languages reduce the speech signal, i.e. not all underlying canonical syllables can be measured in the acoustic signal. (2) Secondly, this degree of reduction is significantly higher in Danish than in Norwegian and Swedish. This left us wondering if the Danish speakers indeed managed to transport more "content" per second than the Norwegian and Swedish speakers did; however, to explore this further, different speech samples were needed, that only consisted of cognate words.

Therefore, in a follow-up study published as Hilton, Schüppert and Gooskens (2011), we complemented the news readers' data with a second corpus, i.e. 16 semantically unpredictable sentences (SUS) that only consisted of cognate words that exist in all three languages. Examples of such sentences are "Et folk deler et job som går"[3] in Danish, "Et folk deler en jobb som går" in Norwegian, and "Ett folk delar ett jobb som går" in Swedish. These 16 sentences per language were read aloud by three speakers per language, all hailing from the capital regions of Copenhagen, Oslo and Stockholm. We analysed these speech samples in a similar way to the analysis in Hilton, Gooskens and Schüppert , i.e. we calculated phonetic and canonical articulation rates per speaker and per language. The results from this highly controlled corpus showed a similar trend as the news readers' data, although less clear-cut: just as in Hilton, Gooskens and Schüppert (2011), a one-way ANOVA revealed that the phonetic articulation rates were not significantly different across the three languages, while the canonical articulation rates were. Here, a Tukey post-hoc test showed, however, that only the difference between Danish and Swedish was significant: Danish speakers produced 4.7 canonical syllables per second, Swedish news readers produced 3.4 canonical syllables per second, while the Norwegian speakers' articulation rate was situated in-between with 3.9 canonical syllables per second.

We can therefore conclude that the three Danish speakers managed to communicate more content per second than the three Swedish speakers did. These are two important findings for the reported asymmetric mutual intelligibility of spoken Danish and Swedish. (1) Firstly, this confirms that speakers of Swedish listening to Danish need to decode the neighbouring language faster than their native language, while the opposite is true for speakers of Danish listening to Swedish. (2) At the same time, speakers of Swedish not only have to process the Danish auditory input faster, but they also have to reconstruct the lexical equivalent with fewer phonetic features, as the degree of reduction in spoken Danish is significantly higher.

To tease apart these two factors and to further investigate the effect of the relatively high degree of reduction in spoken Danish on Norwegian- and Swedish-speaking listeners, we conducted an experimental study (Schüppert, Hilton and Gooskens 2016), for which we asked one native Danish speaker to read aloud a list of 50 semantically unpredictable sentences. All sentences contained four content words, and the speaker was instructed to produce all sentences twice, and in two different ways: (1) slowly and clearly, and (2) fast and (subsequently) less clearly. In these two recordings, the factors "articulation rate" and "reduction" are still intertwined: fast-produced speech is typically less clear, and clear speech is typically somewhat more slowly produced. In a second step, therefore, we manipulated these recordings: we

[3] Trans.: A people share a job that walks.

time-compressed the sentences that were produced slowly and clearly to align their duration with the sentences that were produced fast and less clearly, and we expanded the duration of the sentences that were produced fast and less clearly to align their duration with those from the slow and clear recording. The factors of time-compression and expansion were established sentence-wise and hence different per sentence "pair"; however, the mean factors for duration manipulation were 1.67 and 0.6, respectively. We now had a speech sample of 50 sentences per condition: (1) slowly and clearly, (2) fast and less clearly, (3) fast and clearly, and (4) slowly and less clearly produced. Using this material in a perception study would allow us to tease apart the effects of the factors "articulation rate" and "reduction" on intelligibility, as conditions (1) and (3) contain the same high degree of phonetic information but differ in duration, while conditions (2) and (4) contained the same low degree of phonetic information, and differ in duration. Likewise, conditions (1) and (4) have have exactly the same long duration but differ in the degree of phonetic detail, while conditions (2) and (3) have the exact same short duration while differing in phonetic detail.

For the perception experiment, we instructed 103 Norwegian-speaking and 66 Swedish-speaking participants to translate every sentence into their native language. A control group of 42 native-Danish speaking participants also took part, but as the material was presented in Danish, their task was obviously not to translate, but simply to write up what they heard. For all three groups of participants, we established the number of correctly translated content words (four per sentence), so that every participant could achieve a maximum of 200 points (4 content words x 50 sentences). Not surprisingly, the mean intelligibility of all conditions was much higher for the native Danish listeners (88.1%), and with 46.3%, the Norwegian listeners outperformed the Swedish listeners, who scored 30.4% on average. Interestingly, the pattern in intelligibility scores across the four conditions was the same for all three groups of listeners: slowly and clearly produced sentences (condition 1) were most intelligible, followed by slowly and less clearly produced sentences (condition 4) and fast and unclearly produced sentences (condition 2). Surprisingly, least intelligible of all were the sentences that were produced fast and clearly (condition 3). This suggests that all three groups of listeners, native and non-native, are able to compensate better for reduction phenomena when the amount of reduction fits the articulation rate, compared to a situation in which there actually would have been enough time for a clear pronunciation, but it remained reduced. To sum up, we found that intelligibility improves with increased clarity of the pronunciation, and not so much with longer duration. This suggests that Swedish listeners mainly encounter problems to "restore" the missing phonemes and syllables, and that the increased articulation rate in Danish weighs less heavily on the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility.

In addition to the well-established reduction processes in Danish mentioned above, such as schwa-assimilation and the vocalisation of consonants, there is evidence that [aj] and [ɑw] are becoming subject to monophthongisation and that the unvoiced, unaspirated plosives /p̬/, /t̬/ and /k̬/ are increasingly reduced, at least in Copenhagen Danish (Pharao 2010), where e.g. /he:ˀld/ (<helt>; Engl. "completely") is reduced to /he:ˀl/. Apart from these recent developments, there are many reduction processes in standard Danish that took place several centuries ago, and are so well-established that pronunciation dictionaries only indicate this reduced pronunciation. In the word <mild> pronounced /milˀ/, Engl. "mild" (Molbæk Hansen 1990), for instance, the word-final phonetic segment was dropped several centuries ago, while it is preserved in its Swedish cognate word, which is pronounced /mil:d/ in colloquial Swedish (Hedelin 1997). Importantly, however, the words' orthographic structure is CVCC in both languages, but while the number of segments in spoken Danish has been reduced to three, namely CVC, the num-

ber of phonetic segments remains unreduced in Swedish. The first three phonetic segments of the spoken forms /milˀ/ and /mil:d/ are identical in Danish and Swedish, but while the word ends with /d/ in Swedish, this final plosive has been deleted in contemporary Danish. Nevertheless, the phonetic segment /d/ is found frequently in spoken Danish and generally written with the letter [d], e.g. in [dansk], pronounced /dænsg/ (Engl. "Danish"). It can therefore be assumed that Danes hearing the Swedish word /mil:d/ are able to match the word-final /d/ to the grapheme of their native orthography. In other words, the Danish spelling is consistent with Swedish pronunciation /mil:d/ for literate Danish listeners, while the Swedish spelling is considered to be inconsistent with the Danish pronunciation /milˀ/ to literate Swedish listeners. It can therefore be assumed that literate speakers of Danish match the Swedish word more quickly or more accurately to its native cognate than Swedes do. In a recent study, we tested this assumption experimentally.

Building on previous research that showed that native speakers of English, French, and Chinese activate their orthographic knowledge of these languages not only when reading, but even when listening to their native language (Seidenberg and Tanenhaus 1979; Jakimik, Cole and Rudnicky 1985; Slowiaczek *et al.* 2003; Chéreau, Gaskell and Dumay 2007; Pattamadilok *et al.* 2009; Perre and Ziegler 2008; Perre *et al.* 2009; Qu and Damian 2017), we set up a study to explore if this also holds true for non-native speech. More specifically, in Schüppert *et al.* 2022, we investigated if native speakers of Danish who listened to spoken Swedish made use of their native Danish spelling when asked to translate spoken Swedish words into Danish.

The participants in this study were 26 students aged 23.5 years on average, who were all right-handed, neither had hearing problems nor dyslexia, and had never learnt Swedish. They mainly hailed from the Danish capital Copenhagen and were paid for their time and had travel expenses reimbursed. Half of the participants (N = 13) were male. We compiled a list of 112 isolated Swedish words that had cognates in Danish and that were spelled in the same way, with the exception of the ä–æ and the ö–ø analogies. These words were produced by a male speaker of the Southern Swedish regiolect with no strong dialectal features. Importantly, the words were selected to form two conditions: 56 words for which the listeners were expected to have an advantage from their native orthography because their native Danish spelling was consistent with the phonemic realisation in Swedish (Orthography+ condition, henceforth O+), and 56 words where the listeners were expected to have no advantage from orthography because their native Danish spelling was inconsistent with the phonemic realisation in Swedish (Orthography– condition, henceforth O–). In both conditions, native and non-native pronunciations form minimal pairs that are spelled identically, but differ in their phonemic realisation in exactly one phonetic segment. It was the realisation of this critical phonetic segment, that was either consistent or inconsistent with native orthography, thus forming the two conditions. An example of the O+ condition is the previously mentioned Swedish word [mil:d], which is pronounced /milˀ/ and spelled <mild> in Danish. The critical phoneme, here, is the [d], which has ceased to exist in spoken Danish, but is preserved in the Danish spelling (and preserved in Swedish in spelling as well as in pronunciation). In contrast, an example of the O– condition is the Swedish word /jif:t/ (Engl. "poison"), which is pronounced /gifd/ in Danish, and spelled <gift> in both languages. Here, the critical phoneme is the /j/. Therefore, just as the word /mil:d/, the word /jif:t/ differs with respect to exactly one phoneme, but in contrast to the word /mil:d/, literate Danish listeners cannot benefit from their native orthography for translation purposes when they encounter the Swedish word. If it holds true that the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility between spoken Danish and Swedish is due to the activation of native orthography, it is likely that the words in the O– condition would be

more challenging for the Danish-speaking participants than the words in the O+ condition. Our data confirmed this hypothesis: translation accuracy of words in the O– condition (50%) was significantly lower than in the O+ condition (63%).

In addition to behavioural results, we monitored the whole translation process using an on-line method: event-related potentials. Participants took part in the translation task in the ERP-lab, and we recorded their continuous electroencephalogram (EEG) via 128 electrodes. The continuous EEG recordings were divided off-line into epochs beginning 100 milliseconds prior to the start of the auditory presentation of the word and ending 1100 milliseconds after word-onset. This rendered brain responses that were directly linked to the onset of the word, the so-called event-related potentials (ERPs), for which the 100 milliseconds prior to the onset of the auditory presentation were used as a baseline. Importantly, separate ERPs were formed for the two experimental conditions (only for correctly translated items). This means that brain responses to all 56 words in the O– condition were averaged across all 26 participants, and likewise, brain responses to all 56 words in the O+ condition were averaged across all participants. On parietal-occipital electrodes (O1 and O2, but not Oz), we detected significant differences in the voltages in a time window of 300-350 milliseconds. Here, the voltages for words in the O– condition were significantly more positive than in the O+ condition. This finding is in line with findings by Pattamadilok *et al.* (2008), Perre and Ziegler (2008), and Perre *et al.* (2009), who typically reported an effect of orthographic inconsistency on centro-posterior and occipital electrodes in a 300-350 ms time window. In contrast to these studies, however, inconsistency did not elicit a negativity but a positivity. This effect only reached significance on two occipital electrodes in a pairwise t-test with condition (O– versus O+) as independent factor, and voltage as dependent factor. Furthermore, on central electrodes (Cz, Pz, Oz), we found significant voltage differences in a time window of 750-1000 milliseconds after word-onset. Here, orthographically inconsistent items evoked significantly lower voltages, i.e. significantly more negative-going potentials on centro-posterior and occipital sites than consistent items did. In other words, O– produced more negative voltages than O+ did. This consistency effect reached significance across the whole time window, and was broadly distributed topographically and highly significant, particularly in a smaller window stretching from 800 ms to 900 ms post-stimulus onset. The voltage differences across the two conditions were large enough as to also produce a significant main effect. That means, if averaged across the scalp, voltages elicited by inconsistent items were more negative than those for consistent items. Our ERP data thus suggest that native orthography is accessed during speech recognition of a closely related language. Specifically, in the case of literate Danes confronted with spoken Swedish, this access enhances spoken word recognition of a closely related language.

Conclusion

This research synthesis reported on seven studies conducted within the project *Linguistic Determinants of Mutual Intelligibility in Scandinavia* that focused on the asymmetric intelligibility of spoken Danish and Swedish. By investigating this asymmetry from various angles, we can identify four larger trends. (1) While attitudes held towards spoken Danish are almost universally more negative than attitudes towards spoken Swedish (and Norwegian), in the Danish-Swedish context the attitudes only account for a very small share of the variance in intelligibility. Furthermore, the causality remains unclear. (2) Spoken Danish shows a higher articulation rate and a larger degree of syllable reduction than spoken Swedish (and Norwegian). The second factor seems to cause more problems for Norwegian and Swedish listeners. (3) Danish-Swedish mutual intelligibility is symmetrical in very young children and becomes asymmetrical roughly

in the period when children attend school. (4) Danish- and Swedish-speaking adults confronted with the spoken variety of the neighbouring language (i.e. Swedish and Danish, respectively) make use of their native orthography during speech recognition.

Generally, Danish has a more conservative orthography than Swedish, and, in recent centuries, spoken Danish has been developing further away from its East Nordic root than spoken Swedish (Elbro 2006; Hjorth *et al.* 2018). This has been confirmed by Gooskens and Doetjes (2009), who reported that spoken Swedish is generally closer to written Danish than spoken Danish is to written Swedish. Furthermore, findings reported by Pharao (2010) suggest that, even today, further reduction in colloquial Danish is ongoing. Together with these findings, the evidence that native orthography is accessed not only during written, but also during spoken language recognition supports the hypothesis that the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility between spoken Danish and Swedish, with Danes having fewer difficulties to decode spoken Swedish than vice versa, can at least partly be explained by differences in the depth of the speakers' native orthographic systems. Generally, the combination of two factors (conservative orthography and ongoing syllable reduction during the last centuries until today) makes Danish orthography less transparent than Swedish orthography (Elbro 2006). These differences may partly explain the finding reported by Elley (1992) and Seymour, Aro and Erskine (2003), who showed that Danish children have more difficulties acquiring Danish orthography than their peers from other Nordic countries. However, it seems that, once speakers of Danish finally have mastered the relatively non-transparent orthographic system of their native language, it serves as an additional cue for spoken language recognition in Swedish.

Taken together, the results from the summarised studies suggest that the asymmetry in mutual intelligibility of spoken Danish and Swedish is mainly caused by phonetic features that distinguish the two languages. As Danish schoolchildren become literate, they can start to make use of their native orthography when listening to spoken Swedish, and as adults, their orthographic knowledge helps them to bridge the pronunciation gaps more efficiently than vice versa.

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LEA - Lingue e letterature d'Oriente e d'Occidente

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/bsfm-lea

Citation: S. Harchaoui (2026) Receptive Multilingualism from the Outside: Challenges and Strategies for Teaching Mainland Scandinavian Mutual Intelligibility to French-speaking Learners. "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: pp. 35-52. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-16576.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Receptive Multilingualism from the Outside: Challenges and Strategies for Teaching Mainland Scandinavian Mutual Intelligibility to French-speaking Learners

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Abstract

This article examines receptive multilingualism from an external perspective, focusing on the mutual intelligibility of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish when teaching French-speaking learners. Challenging the assumption that Scandinavian mutual intelligibility is inherently accessible, the study highlights difficulties arising in a foreign academic context shaped by a monolingual tradition. Drawing on qualitative data from a year-long university course, it analyses students' receptive development and metalinguistic awareness. Results show an initial focus on linguistic distance and variation that is gradually replaced by adaptive decoding strategies through systematic exposure, comparative tasks, and reflexive practice. The study argues for a pedagogy of receptive multilingualism tailored to secondary speech communities.

Keywords: Inter-Scandinavian Communication, Mainland Scandinavian Mutual Intelligibility, Mediated Intelligibility, Norwegian as a Foreign Language, Receptive Multilingualism

1. Receptive Multilingualism from the Inside

1.1 Challenges in Teaching Scandinavian Mutual Intelligibility in a Nordic Country

Over the past two decades, the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers have intensified efforts to promote receptive multilingualism[1] among children and young people

[1] I refer to receptive multilingualism according to the definition of Gooskens and van Heuven who defined "intelligibility as the degree to which a listener is able to recognise the linguistic units in the stream of sounds and to establish the order in which they are spoken. Mutual intelligibility is the

through formal education. One notable initiative is the free digital learning platform *Norden i skolen* (The North in the School), that provides a wide range of teaching resources aimed at fostering mutual intelligibility across the Nordic languages,[2] including the indigenous languages Sámi and Greenlandic.

This aim is further reinforced by the updated *Declaration on Nordic Language Policy* (2024), which reaffirms that cooperation among Nordic societies is founded upon the mainland Scandinavian languages – Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish – , that are deemed vital for the region's cohesion and future. The declaration stresses that all Nordic citizens should be able to speak, understand, read, and write the language(s) of the society in which they live, and furthermore, that they should be able to communicate in at least one Scandinavian language and possess knowledge of the others in order to fully engage with the Nordic language space.

While such policies establish an ambitious framework, a closer look at their implementation reveals a more complex reality. Questions arise concerning how these goals are reflected in public education systems and curricula. An early indication of challenges in implementation comes from a 2000 survey by Aas investigating the state of neighbouring language[3] instruction (*nabospråkundervisning*) in Scandinavian primary and lower secondary schools. Using a mixed-methods approach – including teacher surveys, interviews, classroom observations, analyses of curricula and teaching materials – she found that instruction in neighbouring languages occurs only once or twice per year on average, with Norway showing the highest level of activity. The study also highlighted key challenges: insufficient time in Norway and Sweden, low student interest in Denmark, and, more generally, a lack of suitable teaching materials. Aas also pointed out that younger teachers devoted generally less time to this instruction than their older counterparts, raising concerns that the emphasis on neighbouring languages may continue to decline over time.

A follow-up survey a decade later conducted by the Language Council of Norway (Språkrådet) found that many Norwegian teachers deprioritised the comprehension of neighbouring languages in their teaching. The study concluded that "many have a feeling that neighboring language teaching is not taken very seriously, even though the curricula have clear competence goals in this area" (2011, 4). In addition, many of the teachers surveyed felt they had limited qualifications to teach neighbouring languages effectively. Hårstad (2015, 31), who authored a handbook on receptive multilingualism for Norwegian teachers, claims that neighbouring language learning differs fundamentally from traditional foreign language learning, as it emphasises receptive rather than productive skills. That is, comprehension across Scandinavian languages is presumed to be an intuitive faculty among native speakers, rather than something explicitly learned inside the primary community.

mean of the two directions, i.e., the degree to which listener A understands speaker B and vice versa. It should be noted that the two directions can be asymmetric, i.e., can yield different scores" (2021, 87).

[2] The Nordic languages – Danish, Swedish, Norwegian (Bokmål and Nynorsk), Icelandic, and Faroese – may be arranged along a continuum of mutual oral intelligibility. According to Torp (2014, 45), they fall into two main groups: *Insular Nordic* (Icelandic and Faroese) and *Scandinavian*, the latter subdivided into North Scandinavian (Norwegian and Swedish) and South Scandinavian (Danish). In this article, I use the term *mainland Scandinavian languages* to refer specifically to Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian.

[3] i.e. "Nabospråk er altså språkformer som har så mange lingvistiske likhetspunkter at de er innbyrdes forståelige, men som av sosiohistoriske og politiske årsaker likevel regnes som forskjellige språk" (Hårstad 2015, 18). Trans.: Neighbouring languages are language forms which have so many linguistic similarities that they are mutually intelligible, but which, for socio-historical and political reasons, are nevertheless regarded as different languages. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

However, the widespread assumption that cross-linguistic understanding among the mainland Scandinavian languages relies on inherent intelligibility – i.e., "the level of intelligibility that is linked to linguistic factors only, without any influence from previous exposure to the language of the speaker (acquired intelligibility) or another related language (mediated intelligibility)" (Gooskens and van Heuven 2021, 70) – has been considered outdated for several decades. Research has shown that comprehension is shaped not only by linguistic proximity but also by exposure, metalinguistic awareness, and active learning strategies, highlighting the need to view mutual intelligibility as a dynamic and context-dependent process rather than a natural given.

These findings underscore the structural and pedagogical constraints that affect the promotion of mutual intelligibility among the mainland Scandinavian languages. Despite longstanding policy initiatives to support cross-linguistic understanding, the infrequent exposure and lack of resources suggest that institutional support remains insufficient to fully develop receptive multilingual skills. Moreover, the variation in challenges across countries indicates that local educational contexts significantly shape the effectiveness of neighbouring language instruction. This highlights the need for coordinated curricular and material development, as well as teacher training, to enhance systematic opportunities for fostering mutual intelligibility in Nordic schools.

In the following section, I will briefly review the linguistic and extralinguistic factors underlying the asymmetries among the mainland Scandinavian languages and discuss how these factors should be considered in the teaching of the discipline within the Nordic community, and, by extension, in contexts outside the Nordic region. Particular attention will be given to Norwegian.

1.2 Linguistic and Extralinguistic Factors Causing Asymmetric Intelligibility of Mainland Scandinavian Languages

In the Scandinavian countries, receptive multilingualism practice is not self-evident, despite the close linguistic relatedness of the Scandinavian languages. Several challenges in teaching receptive multilingualism within the primary[4] Nordic speech community stem from linguistic asymmetries between the mainland Scandinavian languages, especially between Swedish and Danish (see Schüppert in this volume). According to Gooskens and van Heuven, "many pairs of languages have been identified in which the cross-language intelligibility was far from symmetrical and could not be attributed to differences in exposure or some other social variable" (2021, 55).

In the first major study of inter-Nordic language comprehension among adolescents, Delsing and Lundin-Åkesson (2005, 29) documented significant imbalances in the comprehension of both spoken and written language across the Scandinavian languages. For instance, Norwegian participants were found to understand written Danish more readily than spoken Danish, while Danes tended to understand Bokmål more effectively, and Swedes showed better comprehension of Nynorsk (137).

Building on Haugen's pioneering work (1966), Torp (2014, 70) similarly reported that Norwegians consistently demonstrate better oral comprehension of both Danish and Swedish compared with their neighbouring speakers. Danes better understand Norwegian than Swedish, while Swedes struggle with Danish and have a slightly better grasp of Norwegian.

These differences may be explained in part by Norway's sociolinguistic landscape, which is characterized by a broad spectrum of dialectal variation and the coexistence of two written standards, conditions that arguably foster greater linguistic adaptability among Norwegian speakers.

[4] "La communauté primaire est constituée par les personnes dont l'une des trois langues (danois, norvégien ou suédois) est la première langue (ou langue maternelle selon une terminologie différente" (Ridell 2012, 104).

Haugen (1981,131) developed the idea of "språklig elastisitet" (linguistic elasticity) related to the language climate in a society. He argued that the stronger and more uniform a society's language standard is, the less its speakers will be adept at handling linguistic variation. Hårstad extends this argument by noting that there is a stronger perception in Denmark and Sweden that "det finnes et felles rikksspråk eller normalspråk, både muntlig og skriftlig", and that "denne store graden av språkstandardisering har på sin side gjort dem mindre reseptivt elastiske; de er rett og slett ikke vant til å takle språklig avvik utover det ganske minimale" (2015, 35).[5] By contrast, Norway is often described as a 'dialect paradise' and its tolerance for dialectal diversity contributes to a higher degree of linguistic elasticity; this in turn explains Norwegian speakers' greater capacity for receptive multilingualism.

Additional challenges in intelligibility of mainland Scandinavian languages may be ascribed to extralinguistic factors. As an example, Delsing and Lundin-Åkesson noted that "almost all respondents understood English better than the neighbouring languages" (2005, 145) – a finding that points not only to linguistic exposure but also to ideological preferences. Aurstad (2012, 50) highlights the ideological part of language use arguing that some Scandinavians even avoid using other Scandinavian languages, fearing this may signal insufficient proficiency in English.

These tendencies reflect broader global language ideologies that have reshaped the Nordic linguistic landscape. Although language policy documents express concern about the erosion of domains traditionally reserved for national languages, English continues to enjoy elevated prestige and expanding functional roles, particularly among younger generations and professionals.

Attitudinal and subjective perceptions also play a critical role. Two French studies focused on mutual intelligibility of distant languages highlight the importance of openness and sociolinguistic awareness in fostering comprehension. Méziane, in examining intelligibility between Norwegian and French, found that perceived linguistic proximity or distance is shaped by geographical, cultural, and psychological factors not just structural similarities: "Nous avons tous une représentation de la proximité ou de la distance plus ou moins grande qui subsiste entre les langues, à la fois géographique, culturelle et linguistique" (2017, 46). In other words, receptive multilingualism also regards language attitude and subjectivity that results from perception rather than linguistic skills.

Similarly, Aurstad demonstrated in her study among Norwegian and Swedish speakers that

> [l]a capacité de compréhension s'explique en partie par le désir de comprendre et par l'attitude sociolinguistique envers les deux autres langues voisines. Un locuteur motivé et ouvert à la communication est plus apte à comprendre qu'un locuteur portant sur ses voisins scandinaves (et donc sur leur langue) un jugement négatif. Ce paramètre du prestige et du statut social de la langue est souvent aussi important pour la compréhension que celui de la simple ressemblance linguistique. (2004, 480)

Learners who are open to cross-cultural communication and view neighbouring languages positively are more likely to succeed than those with exclusionary or negative attitudes.

Thus, receptive multilingualism depends not only on typological closeness, but also on individual willingness and practice, sociolinguistic awareness, and frequency of exposure. These findings underscore the importance of integrating reflective, attitudinal, and experiential components into receptive multilingualism pedagogy. Without attending to these dimensions, instructional efforts risk overlooking the very factors that determine success in cross-linguistic comprehension.

[5] Trans.: there exists a common national language or standard language, both spoken and written […] this high degree of language standardisation has, in turn, made them less receptively elastic; they are simply not used to dealing with linguistic deviation beyond what is quite minimal.

2. Receptive Multilingualism from the Outside

While receptive multilingualism is often viewed as a natural feature of intra-Scandinavian communication, its implementation in foreign language contexts raises specific pedagogical and sociolinguistic challenges. From an external perspective, the perception of a unified Nordic linguistic space remains widespread though recent studies have shown that mutual intelligibility among Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish is far from straightforward, particularly among younger generations.

This divergence is particularly evident in foreign language learning environments, such as French universities, where the Nordic languages are studied not as neighbouring tongues within a shared sociolinguistic context, but as distinct foreign languages, and where opportunities for exposure differ significantly from those in the Nordic region itself.

Branets, Bahtina, and Verschik (2020) introduced and defined the concept of "mediated receptive multilingualism" through a case study where Estonian speakers with no prior exposure to Ukrainian successfully comprehended Ukrainian texts via their knowledge of Russian. This theoretical concept is particularly relevant to the present case study, as my informants – whose first language is French – accessed Danish and Swedish through Norwegian. In this respect, their experience parallels what has been described in the literature, where comprehension of a less familiar language is facilitated by the mediation of a linguistically related and more familiar one.

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1 The Context of the French University Setting

In recent years, growing interest in Nordic studies in France has led to the development of a university-level course focused specifically on mutual intelligibility of the mainland Scandinavian languages called "intercompréhension nordique". This course is designed for bachelor students with a background in Nordic studies, particularly those who have studied Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish as a foreign language for at least two years.

Crucially, the course emphasises receptive over productive skills. Its primary objectives are to help students identify the three languages in both spoken and written form, recognise linguistic features that distinguish them, and understand the general meaning of texts and speech in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish. In this sense, the course encourages students to develop strategies for comprehension without requiring active production in all three languages.

As part of the pedagogical framework, an introductory module entitled "Reflecting on intercomprehension" was designed to foster reflexive engagement with the mainland Scandinavian languages and introduce a two-pronged research approach. The module pursued three main objectives. First, it aimed to raise students' awareness of their personal relationship to the Nordic languages and to mutual intelligibility, including the identification of prior knowledge, areas for improvement in Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish, and the development of metalinguistic awareness. Second, it encouraged comparative analysis of similarities and divergences among the mainland Scandinavian languages, particularly regarding written proximity, distance, and cross-linguistic correspondences. Third, it sought to provide broader knowledge of the Nordic linguistic landscape, including national language policies and the distinction between primary and secondary Nordic communities.

Yet, despite this pedagogical focus, a key challenge lies in the availability – and applicability – of instructional materials. Most existing resources are produced in Nordic languages and intended for use by speakers within the primary Nordic speech community (Rekdal 2002; Eide and Breivik 2015; Hårstad 2015). While projects such as EuroComGerm and Well-BeInter-comprehension have facilitated the development of intercomprehension tools across multiple Germanic and Romance languages, the course examined in this study is conducted entirely in French and focuses specifically on the three mainland Scandinavian languages, without reference to other Germanic languages such as German or Dutch.

2.1.2 A Targeted Pedagogical Approach

As I have discussed in another article (Harchaoui, forthcoming), this discrepancy reveals fundamental differences between the primary Nordic speech community and learners of these languages. The following table summarises the main contrasts between the two groups:

Nordic Languages Speakers	**Nordic Languages Learners**
- Nordic language as dominant (or mother tongue)	- French as dominant language
- *ettspråkprinsipp*[6] – Assumption of a shared linguistic continuum	- Nordic languages studied as foreign languages
- "Neighbouring" languages	- "Distant" languages
- Inherent mutual intelligibility	- Acquired intelligibility, learning-based approach
- Presumed shared intercultural skills	- Intercultural skills must be acquired
- Belonging to the primary Nordic speech community	- External to the Nordic speech community

Tab. 1 – Presupposed main differences between the Nordic primary speech community and the learners outside the Nordic countries

These distinctions highlight a central pedagogical concern: learners of a mainland Scandinavian language cannot rely on inherent mutual intelligibility. Instead, they require explicit instructions and structured exposure to variation in form and meaning. The "neighbouring language" model presumes a sociolinguistic context that is simply not accessible to learners in a foreign language setting, where linguistic proximity must be learned rather than presupposed.

This distinction is also visible in the structure of language acquisition. While traditional second language instruction often follows a linear model – moving from reading and listening to speaking and writing – receptive multilingualism challenges this progression. As Escudé and Janin (2010, 51) suggest, cross-comprehension may develop through a recursive, back-and-forth process in which receptive skills (especially reading) support the development of productive competence, but not necessarily in a sequential way. Learners may develop strong receptive capacities without progressing equally in oral or written production, and vice versa.

[6] "Ettspråkprinsippet innebærer at enhver skandinav normalt bruker sitt eget morsmål i samtale med personer fra et av de øvrige landa i Skandinavia. I stedet for å veksle mellom tre språk holder altså den enkelte seg til ett språk uavhengig av hvilket (skandinavisk) språk samtalepartneren bruker" (Hårstad 2015, 12). Trans.: The one-language principle implies that Scandinavian speakers normally use their own mother tongue when conversing with individuals from other Scandinavian countries. Rather than switching between the three languages, people continue to use their own language, regardless of which (Scandinavian) language their interlocutor uses.

Within the field of interactional linguistics, no standardised or widely recognised pedagogical method has yet been established – either in the Nordic countries or abroad – for the teaching of Nordic mutual intelligibility. Current approaches remain largely experiential, grounded more in practice and exposure than in formal instruction. Importantly, the Nordic mutual intelligibility course described here operates at the intersection of linguistic analysis and lived language practice. It is not a course in learning a new language per se, but rather a course in accessing new linguistic material through previously acquired knowledge. This means that pedagogical success depends not only on linguistic content, but also on learners' individual language backgrounds, prior exposure to multilingual environments, and openness to variation. Factors such as mother tongue, monolingual or multilingual upbringing, and experience with linguistic diversity all play a role in shaping outcomes. This process is inherently uneven, as learners differ in their adaptability depending on plenty of factors.

Moreover, extra-linguistic factors – such as language ideologies, emotional responses, and contextual familiarity – also influence students' ability to engage with variation. Global language policies that favour English, for instance, can undermine tolerance for non-standard forms, while learners' affective states (confidence, anxiety, or motivation) may impact their ability to process unfamiliar input. Thus, understanding receptive multilingualism from the outside requires a holistic perspective that accounts for both linguistic and non-linguistic variables in the learning process.

In the following section, I turn to a concrete case study based on a year-long course conducted at a French university. The analysis aims to explore French-speaking learners' attitudes toward receptive multilingualism and to identify the specific challenges they encounter to understand Danish and Swedish through Norwegian. Through qualitative data, I explore how students develop receptive skills in Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, and how their overt attitudes toward linguistic variation shift over time. In particular, the study seeks to determine whether recurring patterns in the learning process can be observed across this secondary speech community.

3. The Survey Protocol

3.1 Participants

The study was conducted in 2022 with a group of seven students who were in their final year of a bachelor's degree programme in Nordic Studies at a university in France.[7] All participants had Norwegian as their primary language of specialisation, and all but one reported French as their mother tongue (in addition to one student who was Dutch native speaker).

At the beginning of their bachelor's programme, all participants were complete beginners in Norwegian Bokmål. By the final year of the degree, participants' proficiency in Norwegian ranged from intermediate (B1) to advanced (B2). To complete their language training, each student also received one hour of instruction in Norwegian Nynorsk per week during the final year, although six of the seven continued to use Bokmål as their preferred written norm.

The participants represented a heterogeneous group in terms of age (ranging from 19 to 65) and linguistic background. Despite French being the dominant language for most respondents, all had prior experience with multiple foreign languages, reporting between five and twenty languages studied to varying degrees. This multilingual background provided an important

[7] All data presented in this article are originally in French and have been translated by the author.

basis for examining how learners mobilise their existing linguistic repertoires when engaging in receptive multilingualism.

Respondent	Gender	Age	Number of studied languages	First mainland Scandinavian language learned	Second mainland Scandinavian language learned	Self-reported skills in Norwegian Bokmål
R1	F	24	5	Norwegian	Swedish	B1
R2	F	24	20	Norwegian	Swedish	A2/B1
R3	F	25	8	Norwegian	Swedish	A1 (oral) / B2 (written)
R4	F	19	6	Norwegian	Swedish	A2 (oral) / B1 (written)
R5	M	65	5	Norwegian	Swedish	B2
R6	M	21	7	Norwegian	Swedish	B1
R7	M	23	15	Norwegian	Danish	B1/B2
Total						N= 7 respondents

Tab. 2 – Participants' Linguistic Background and Perceived Competence in mainland Scandinavian languages

Written comprehension in Norwegian Bokmål emerged as the respondents' strongest skill, a finding that aligns with expectations given their specialisation in Norwegian from the outset of their undergraduate programme. Students self-reported relative ease in understanding everyday topics, literary texts, and political or social commentary in Norwegian. However, oral comprehension presented greater challenges, particularly due to dialectal variation and the speed of spoken input. One participant remarked: "It depends on the accents and how fast they speak. A normal pace with an accent similar to those we have seen in class is understandable" (R4). Another cited difficulty recalling vocabulary or differentiating between similar-sounding forms across languages: "I still regularly find myself unable to find the right words, confusing languages, and struggling to understand certain terms" (R7).

In terms of production, the respondents typically found that writing was less challenging than speaking. Several respondents explained that they appreciated having time to think and self-correct when writing: "If I am given time to think about the structures and look up the necessary vocabulary, it is manageable" (R4). Spoken expression, by contrast, was described as more demanding – primarily due to the spontaneity required and limited vocabulary recall. Still, multiple participants identified their conversational skills as functional, especially in immersion contexts: "I consider myself to have a certain level of Norwegian that allows me to communicate without too many problems when speaking" (R7). "I think I have an advanced conversational level. I have been able to hold conversations on various topics with native speakers" (R6).

The participants' strength in written comprehension of Norwegian Bokmål can be a salient factor in their subsequent engagement with Danish and Swedish. Given the high degree of orthographic and lexical overlap among the mainland Scandinavian languages, especially between Norwegian Bokmål and Danish, it can be expected that competence in reading Norwegian facilitates the identification of cross-linguistic correspondences and thus lowers the threshold for accessing written Danish and by extension Swedish. This supports earlier findings

that receptive multilingualism in closely related languages is particularly robust in the written modality (e.g., Frinsel *et al.* 2015).

By contrast, the persistent challenges students reported in oral comprehension of Norwegian – particularly those linked to dialectal variation, speech rate, and lexical retrieval – help account for the difficulties they later encountered in processing spoken Danish and Swedish. The well-documented phonetic reduction and syllable structure of Danish (Gooskens and van Heuven 2021, 55, 79) further amplify these issues, rendering oral comprehension significantly more demanding than in the written mode. The observed asymmetry between written and oral proficiency also extends to productive skills. Students consistently characterised writing as more manageable than speaking, attributing this to the opportunity to reflect, monitor, and draw on external resources. This could parallel their experiences in Danish and Swedish, where written input was processed with relative confidence while spontaneous oral interaction imposed greater cognitive and lexical strain.

From a receptive multilingualism perspective, Norwegian thus functions both as a facilitating language and as a source of constraint. On the one hand, it provides a solid written base learners can use as a foundation to extrapolate to the other Scandinavian languages. On the other hand, its oral challenges anticipate and mirror the difficulties posed by Danish and, to a lesser extent, Swedish. This dual role underscores the importance of considering not only structural similarities, but also modality-specific processing demands when analysing mutual intelligibility across closely related languages.

3.2 Instruments

To investigate the development of receptive multilingual skills among French-speaking learners of Scandinavian languages, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered at the end of a one-year course on mutual intelligibility of the mainland Scandinavian languages. Responses were collected individually and anonymously to encourage honesty and depth of reflection. The questionnaire, consisting of 30 items (see *Appendix*), was designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative information, combining closed questions (e.g., Likert-scale evaluations) with open-ended items that encouraged participants to provide detailed reflections on their linguistic experiences.

The questions were organised into thematic sections. The first section focused on participants' self-assessed proficiency in Norwegian and in other Scandinavian languages, providing a baseline for evaluating their linguistic competence. A second section explored expectations and preconceptions prior to the course, including attitudes towards Danish and Swedish and initial definitions of the concept of mutual intelligibility. The third section investigated changes observed after the course was completed, with questions targeting both perceived progress in comprehension and the role of Norwegian as a mediating language for understanding Danish and Swedish. Additional items addressed participants' evaluation of specific exercises, their preferred learning strategies, and their views on the pedagogical status of the course (whether as a continuation of Norwegian studies or as a distinct discipline). Finally, two Likert-scale questions (1-10) measured the perceived usefulness of the course for participants' academic training and professional development.

By combining open and closed questions, the questionnaire provided insights into both the subjective dimension of language learning (overt attitudes, beliefs, and self-confidence) and the more structural aspects of receptive skills (oral vs. written comprehension, graphemic correspondences, and cross-linguistic transfer). This dual design made it possible to trace how students' perceptions evolved during the course while also highlighting individual variation in

strategies and outcomes. Open-ended items invited participants to provide detailed comments, while closed questions offered structured points of comparison across respondents.

In addition to the questionnaire, the data collection comprised two further phases of evaluation: 1. A series of written comprehension exercises, focusing on Danish and Swedish, intended to measure how students leveraged their knowledge of Norwegian and French to interpret unfamiliar texts; 2. Oral comprehension tasks, followed by individual interviews, where students reflected on their experiences and feelings during the various stages of the course. This mixed-methods approach allowed for triangulation between self-perception, actual comprehension skills, and attitudes towards receptive multilingualism, offering an understanding of the pedagogical process from both cognitive and affective standpoints. For the purposes of this article, only results from the written survey are presented. The results concerning written comprehension exercises will be published in another article (Harchaoui forthcoming), while those on oral comprehension are currently under analysis.

3.3 Participants' Expectations for a Mutual Intelligibility Course

One particularly revealing finding of the study is that none of the participants regarded the mutual intelligibility course as a traditional language course, even before starting the course. Rather, they articulated expectations grounded in the assumption of an inherent intelligibility among the mainland Scandinavian languages. As one respondent observed, this stemmed from "the similarity of these three languages in terms of grammar and vocabulary" (R1), coupled with the widespread belief that "in general, Scandinavians understand each other" (R5). Another participant emphasised the geographical and historical proximity of the languages, remarking that "they had a common language of origin, and the countries were close and relatively similar. But I did not really have any more ideas" (R3).

A particularly illustrative account came from respondent 6, who drew a parallel with the French linguistic situation: "Before starting my degree, I was completely unaware of this mutual understanding and knew very little about Nordic languages and societies in general. So, I first learned my language of specialisation, i.e. Norwegian (Bokmål), and then became aware of Scandinavian mutual intelligibility. I was immediately informed that it included Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Still unfamiliar with other Nordic languages, I defined this intercomprehension as almost three different 'accents' of a single language. I could sometimes explain it to people around me by using an extremely simplified parallel: the understanding between what could be a kind of Parisian dialect and its Marseille counterpart (including a strong accent, apocopes and other syntactic modifications). It was therefore possible for me to imagine that all those included in this misunderstanding could converse without changing their usual speech, but only by making a minimum effort to understand each other, due to the extreme similarity of the mainland Scandinavian languages in terms of syntax".

Respondent 7 similarly stressed the potential for communication in one's own language as an attractive alternative to relying on English: "The possibility of communicating between speakers of different Nordic languages in their own languages has always seemed preferable to me to using English, and something appealing. I have already had interactions with Swedes and Danes (both spoken and written), and it was clear that mutual intelligibility was possible, even with my poor skills, but that there were some significant barriers to overcome (e.g. Danish pronunciation). Mutual intelligibility among native speakers, on the other hand, seemed achievable, if not easy".

Yet not all students shared this perspective. For example, one participant underscored the challenges posed by limited proficiency in Norwegian and the difficulty of recognising structural parallels: "For me, Scandinavian mutual intelligibility was not obvious, both because my level

of Norwegian was too low to detect similarities with other languages, and because I was closed-minded to comparison. For me, these languages only shared a few words in common but were not mutually intelligible and did not have much in common in terms of grammar or syntax, for example" (R4).

Together, these testimonies highlight the diversity of preconceptions students brought to the course: while several assumed a high degree of inherent similarity, others regarded intelligibility as less obvious, conditioned by linguistic competence and openness to a comparative approach to the Scandinavian languages.

Concerning expectations, most of them emphasised a desire to acquire strategies or "keys" for comprehension rather than to achieve productive competence in Danish or Swedish. As one of the respondents explained: "I expected to learn the main keys to understanding that would allow me to converse with Danish and Swedish speakers, but not to learn to speak those languages" (R1).

Several highlighted interest in identifying similarities and differences across vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation, and in understanding how receptive multilingualism functions in practice between speakers of related languages: "My expectations concerned differences and similarities in vocabulary, conjugation, and pronunciation – understanding how mutual intelligibility is possible and how it presents itself among different speakers" (R3).

A few respondents reported having no clear expectations, though they were aware of structural proximities between Norwegian and the other Scandinavian languages, particularly between Danish and Norwegian in written form: "I had no expectations. I knew that Danish and Norwegian are very similar in writing, and that Swedish is less close in writing but more so orally. I had already read Danish and Swedish, and I had also spoken Norwegian with Swedes and found that they understood me. My general difficulties with listening comprehension had bothered me a lot" (R5).

Others anticipated learning practical tools or "conversion" strategies to make unknown forms intelligible, describing the course as a way to develop "means by which the comprehension of Swedish and Danish would become possible" (R6). Finally, one respondent characterised the training as a kind of communicative bricolage rather than a traditional language-learning endeavour: "I was not expecting to learn other mainland Scandinavian languages properly, but rather to receive training in a kind of DIY approach [une sorte de bricolage] facilitating communication, rather than genuine language learning" (R7).

These answers reveal that students approached the course not as an opportunity to acquire new languages in the traditional sense, but as a means to develop receptive strategies and metalinguistic awareness to facilitate cross-Scandinavian communication.

3.4 Overt Attitudes Towards Danish and Swedish

In the questionnaire, respondents were also asked to reflect on their attitudes toward Danish and Swedish before and after having completed the course. The responses largely mirrored trends observed among native Nordic speakers, particularly regarding asymmetries in comprehension. Before the course, written Danish was generally described as easier to understand than spoken Danish, due to similarities with Norwegian Bokmål: "Written Danish is much easier because it is almost identical to Norwegian" (R4) or: "I read Danish easily due to the similarity with Norwegian" (R5).

However, spoken Danish posed persistent challenges. As one of the respondents put it: "Danish is still very difficult to understand when it is spoken. I can more or less follow along when reading a text read by a Danish person, but without written support, it remains difficult to understand anything" (R4). When asked which aspects of Danish had become easier to

understand after the course, most respondents highlighted written comprehension as their strongest area. Several described written Danish as "rather simple to understand" (R1) or even "nothing very complicated to spot and adjust in one's head" given its proximity to Norwegian (R4). Others emphasised that consistent exposure in class had helped them consolidate reading skills: "The written form of Danish now seems even easier to grasp… I have been able to read far more Danish than before and get used to its differences and similarities with Bokmål and Nynorsk" (R6). The number system was also repeatedly mentioned as an aspect that had become more transparent, with one respondent noting: "The Danish system for counting is logical – once you understand how it works" (R4).

Some participants reported incremental progress in oral comprehension, describing how practice and awareness of phonological features aided perception. One student explained: "Now I understand why I do not understand Danish. I know about the *stød* and that p, t, and k are pronounced differently depending on their position" (R3). Another mentioned being able to segment words in speech and recognise sound correspondences, even if comprehension remained partial: "I first managed to separate words in sentences and now I know which sounds have equivalents" (R6).

Nevertheless, oral comprehension remained the most challenging area overall. Respondents consistently pointed to the speed and indistinct articulation of spoken Danish as major obstacles: "It is still a bit difficult to understand when a Dane is speaking – the pace is sometimes too fast, and I need it slower than Norwegian" (R1). Others singled out the vowel system and the *stød* as particularly problematic. As one put it: "Even though I know more about pronunciation, the language is still very difficult to understand, if not impossible in most cases. The *stød* is what really trips me up" (R3).

Several participants stressed that the limited time devoted to phonology in the course contributed to these difficulties: "Danish pronunciation is still difficult… It would have required more course time" (R4). Others reflected that while theoretical knowledge was useful, it did not automatically translate into fluent comprehension: "It must be a question of practice; knowing the theoretical principles is not enough for it to become automatic" (R5). For some, oral comprehension remained the weak point: "Oral comprehension is still the most different aspect and therefore the most difficult – by far" (R7).

Regarding Swedish, comprehension was generally better – both orally and in writing – before the course: "Having learned Norwegian before Swedish helped a lot and makes comprehension and expression easier" (R3). "As for Swedish, I am now beginning to understand it quite easily, both orally and in writing, if the vocabulary is not too different from Norwegian" (R4).

After the course, respondents generally highlighted greater ease with oral comprehension than they had initially anticipated. Several explained that Swedish pronunciation was perceived as closer to Norwegian, making it easier to process. As one noted: "Oral comprehension [of Swedish] is easier because I find it close to Norwegian pronunciation, which we had mainly studied, and we learned what the sound differences were" (R3). Another remarked that "Swedish is easier to understand orally than I thought at the beginning. The accent is fluid, so it is much easier to understand them when they speak" (R4).

Phonological awareness and prosody were frequently cited as facilitating factors. Respondent 6 reflected: "I have much more ease with Swedish prosody. I was able to set real rules for what I could previously only understand instinctively… My ear naturally picked up the prosody, and I think I can reproduce it without too many errors".

Exposure to both written and oral Swedish, particularly through comparative exercises, also helped students identify systematic correspondences: "I can now recognise the [sj] sound

and know which letter combinations it corresponds to, and how it relates to Norwegian terms" (R6). At the same time, respondents acknowledged persistent difficulties. Limited classroom exposure was mentioned by some as a barrier to progress: "In terms of oral comprehension it has not changed – it stayed at the same level because we hardly listened to any Swedish" (R1). Others pointed to problematic sounds and shifting vowel values: "The pronunciation of *ä*, which changes depending on the word and dialect, the grammar, and the verbs that are not recognisable from Norwegian" (R2). Lexical distance was also cited as an obstacle: "It remains difficult when the vocabulary has no common root with Norwegian… when the vocabulary is too different, I cannot rely on my Norwegian knowledge" (R4).

Prosody, while often described as a helpful cue, was also considered a source of confusion. Respondent 6 admitted: "Prosody still sometimes hinders my comprehension of Swedish… we actually worked very little on it in the intercomprehension course, which I regret". Still, several participants noted interference between the languages during production: "When it comes to expression, it is more difficult because you have to think of the vocabulary in Swedish, and often it only comes to me in Norwegian" (R4).

In sum, students tended to perceive Swedish oral comprehension as more accessible than Danish, largely due to perceived phonological proximity to Norwegian and a "smoother" prosodic pattern. However, dialectal variation, prosodic complexity, and lexical divergence continued to pose significant challenges, particularly in the absence of systematic practice and exposure.

3.5 Shifts in Language Attitudes and Confidence

The most significant shift observed over the course was in students' metalinguistic awareness and confidence changes over the year. Responses varied considerably during the first lesson, when students tended to doubt their ability to understand the other two Scandinavian languages, despite their knowledge of Norwegian. At the outset, several students expressed scepticism about the feasibility of cross-comprehension: "The two languages seemed generally difficult to understand. Danish in particular was difficult to pronounce. Swedish felt like a completely different language. But Danish in particular was difficult to pronounce. With Swedish, it was more that it was a different language, and I could not see how to make it fit in with Norwegian. For Danish, it was because it has a reputation for being pronounced with a hot potato in the mouth and is therefore incomprehensible. Swedish was less obvious, but I clearly did not trust the concept of neighbouring language understanding" (R4, before the course).

By the end of the year, the same participant revised their position: "In my opinion, Nordic mutual intelligibility was not a given, and I did not think that Danish and Swedish would be easy to understand. I was too closed off to the idea that learning Norwegian would help me with Danish or Swedish" (R4, after the course).

After completing the course, respondents described it as a metalinguistic experience that helped them build awareness of language variation and proximity. Several commented on the challenge of recognising similarities between the mainland Scandinavian languages, especially when these were not perceived as "natural": "With Swedish, *ä* and *ö* felt like an extra mental step… Transferring *ä* to *æ* and *ö* to *ø*. We learned that certain letters in Norwegian produce certain sounds, and in Swedish, you get the same sounds with different letters" (R3). This perception highlights the gap between structural proximity and learner intuition. Rather than feeling the interconnectedness of the languages instinctively, students needed to consciously learn the correspondences.

Students also reported that the course encouraged a different, more reflective way of engaging with languages: "For me, it is a different way of learning languages. Less theoretical than

linguistics, less academic than traditional language learning. It is more like real-life learning – through practice and building on what you already know. The important thing is to give extra tools to those who can, without putting others in difficulty" (R5). This answer suggests that respondents were not only acquiring new linguistic competencies but also developing greater metacognitive awareness of their own learning processes. The multimodal pedagogical approach was perceived as both practical and exploratory, encouraging students to engage reflectively with their progress.

Preconceptions and mental biases strongly influenced how participants evaluated their potential for success in receptive multilingualism. For example, when asked whether their skills in Danish or Swedish had improved over the course (questions 25-27), one student explained: "It is definitely better because before this course I thought I was incapable of understanding even a single word of Danish. I am no longer afraid of writing. My oral skills are definitely better than nothing" (R4). The same respondent added about Swedish: "Swedish is easier to understand when spoken than I initially thought". Metalinguistic remarks such as "I initially thought" indicate that students were able to challenge earlier assumptions, ultimately adopting a more flexible and exploratory approach to comprehension.

Participants also highlighted the crucial role of sustained exposure to the three languages in fostering receptive skills. Regular contact was seen as essential for developing the automatisms required to detect similarities, while also building the foundational knowledge necessary to interpret differences. Increased exposure in turn bolstered confidence, as students learned to decode unfamiliar forms and patterns more effectively. Guided interpretation and systematic cross-linguistic comparison further enhanced their capacity for linguistic elasticity and their tolerance of variation. As one participant noted, "I have become accustomed to the pronunciation of Danish" (R1).

With respect to Swedish, one respondent explained: "I heard and read a lot of Swedish… Over time, my ear naturally picked up the prosody, and I now think I can reproduce it fairly accurately. On the other hand, having learned the rules of Swedish in my introductory language classes, I was able to relate this to my language of specialisation [Norwegian]. As a result, I rely much less on 'instinct'" (R6). Finally, another student reflected on structural similarities: "Since the vocabulary is almost identical, with the difference being in a few points (e.g. voiceless or voiced plosives) that we have also seen in the linguistics course, Norwegian and Danish have similar written forms" (R4).

Overall, these comments reveal that students gradually moved from initial scepticism and uncertainty toward an active engagement with linguistic variation, supported by exposure, comparison, and the gradual internalisation of cross-linguistic correspondences. One respondent summarised this transformation as follows: "The course is, in my opinion, a new field that helped me discover new aspects of Norwegian, especially vocabulary, and let us hear a variety of accents. Understanding what makes Norwegian understandable to Swedes and Danes gave me a new way of thinking about Norwegian itself" (R3).

The results of this study confirm that the Scandinavian mutual intelligibility course functions through a recursive, back-and-forth learning process, and serves as an effective tool for enhancing students' metalinguistic awareness – particularly in relation to the Norwegian language. Learners' sensitivity to linguistic variation and their capacity for cross-comprehension were shown to be strongly shaped by ideological frameworks, most notably the dominant French monolingual ideology.

Before the course, students displayed limited flexibility in their approach to language, often taking linguistic norms for granted and seldom questioning variation or change. This rigidity inclined them to focus on differences rather than similarities among the Scandinavian

languages, with several reporting that they "did not understand" without attempting interpretive strategies. Such attitudes weakened both their intuitive comprehension and their confidence.

Over the course of the programme, however, students were progressively encouraged to confront and reconsider these mental biases. Systematic exposure to internal variation within the Scandinavian languages required them to adjust their expectations and adopt a more exploratory and adaptive stance. What initially appeared as a lack of linguistic flexibility gradually evolved into active engagement with strategies of bricolage and reflexivity.

By the end of the academic year, many participants expressed greater ease in navigating various linguistic forms. The course's pedagogical structure – situated between foreign language instruction and theoretical linguistic analysis – was instrumental in this development. Focused work on graphemic correspondences across the Scandinavian languages further enabled students to detect structural regularities, thereby facilitating inter-Scandinavian pattern recognition and reinforcing their confidence in receptive skills.

4. Improvements and Conclusion

A key area for improvement lies in making receptive multilingualism meaningful for the students by placing learners at the centre of a reflexive process. In contexts such as Scandinavian mutual intelligibility taught in a French university, the inherently hybrid nature of the situation calls for an equally hybrid teaching model. This necessitates moving beyond traditional methods of foreign language teaching or purely theoretical linguistics and instead adopting a pedagogy that integrates linguistic analysis with reflective language awareness.

Effective instruction in receptive multilingualism must address both the linguistic and ideological dimensions of cross-linguistic comprehension. Students should be encouraged to reflect on their own linguistic backgrounds, as well as on broader ideological influences – such as monolingual norms and standard language ideologies – that shape their perceptions of linguistic variation. Such reflection fosters greater tolerance toward variation and helps develop linguistic flexibility for successful cross-comprehension.

Receptive skills should not be regarded as intuitive but as competencies that can be deliberately cultivated. Structured exposure, training in graphemic correspondences, and explicit focus on structural parallels across Scandinavian languages, can scaffold this process. The more learners encounter inter-Scandinavian variation, in both oral and written forms, the more confident and effective they become in managing comprehension. At the heart of receptive multilingualism pedagogy lies this dynamic cycle of interpretation, self-correction, and reflection.

This study has aimed to reframe receptive multilingualism as a situated and reflexive practice beyond the Nordic primary speech community. Teaching receptive multilingualism in non-Nordic contexts therefore requires rethinking traditional pedagogical paradigms. Rather than relying on prescriptive norms or linear models of acquisition, educators should cultivate metalinguistic insight, promote openness to variation, and embrace the dynamic nature of understanding across closely related languages.

Finally, although exploratory, the survey protocol used in this study is intended to be administered annually to track recurring trends among student cohorts. This longitudinal perspective will provide a basis for refining classroom practices and continuously improving course design.

Appendix

1. To what extent do you consider yourself proficient in Norwegian? Please provide as many details as possible.

2. To what extent do you consider yourself proficient in one or more other Nordic languages? Please provide as many details as possible.
3. Before starting the course on mutual intelligibility among Scandinavian languages, what were your expectations regarding the learning of other mainland Scandinavian languages?
4. Before starting the course on mutual intelligibility among Scandinavian languages, how did you define the concept of Nordic mutual intelligibility? Please provide as many details as possible.
5. Before the course began, did you consider it to be primarily a continuation of your Norwegian studies, or a distinct field of study in its own right?
6. Before the course began, which aspects of Danish and Swedish did you perceive as easy to understand?
7. For what reasons?
8. Before the course began, which aspects of Danish and Swedish seemed difficult to understand?
9. For what reasons?
10. Now that the course is completed, which aspects of Danish do you find easy to understand?
11. For what reasons?
12. Now that the course is completed, which aspects of Danish do you find difficult to understand?
13. For what reasons?
14. In what ways did your knowledge of Norwegian facilitate your understanding of Danish? Please provide as many details as possible.
15. Now that the course is completed, which types of exercises do you consider most effective for improving your Danish? Please provide concrete examples if possible.
16. Now that the course is completed, which aspects of Swedish do you find easy to understand?
17. For what reasons?
18. Now that the course is completed, which aspects of Swedish do you find difficult to understand?
19. For what reasons?
20. In what ways did your knowledge of Norwegian facilitate your understanding of Swedish? Please provide as many details as possible.
21. Which types of exercises do you consider most effective for improving your Swedish? Please provide concrete examples if possible.
22. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not at all, 10 = very much), how useful do you consider the course to have been for your academic training?
23. On a scale from 1 to 10 (1 = not at all, 10 = very much), how useful do you consider the course to have been for your professional development? (Please provide details if possible.)
24. After completing the course, do you now regard it primarily as a continuation of your Norwegian studies, or as a distinct discipline in its own right?
25. Do you consider that your skills in Danish have improved as a result of the course? Please specify in which areas (regardless of whether your answer is affirmative or negative).
26. For what reasons?
27. Do you consider that your skills in Swedish have improved as a result of the course? Please specify in which areas (regardless of whether your answer is affirmative or negative).
28. For what reasons?
29. In situations requiring mutual intelligibility, would you choose to use Norwegian or English to communicate?
30. For what reasons?

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Anglicisms in the Nordic Languages: Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones?

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OPEN ACCESS

Citation: H. Gottlieb (2026) Anglicisms in the Nordic Languages: Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones?. Quaderni di Lea 9: pp. 53-74. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-16374.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract

Many young Danes, Swedes and Norwegians prefer to communicate in English rather than in their native tongue (Gooskens 2006; Bacquin and Zola Christensen 2013), and a major part of the new words in the Nordic languages are based on English (Gottlieb 2020). Will English prevail as a lingua franca in the Nordic region? With that question in mind, this study analyses some recent English-induced developments in the Scandinavian languages. While Anglicism dictionaries present the three languages as moving in different directions, the present study – by exploiting large contemporary text corpora – shows cross-linguistic convergence, suggesting better chances for mutual understanding among Scandinavians.

Keywords: Anglicisms, Linguistic Convergence, Neighbouring-language Comprehension, Scandinavian Languages

> "To a Dane Swedish is a difficult language pronounced in Norwegian, while to a Swede Danish is Norwegian pronounced in a difficult way" (Haugen 1966, 289)

1. Mutual Intelligibility in the Nordic Countries

Before discussing the influence of English on the Nordic languages, we will look at the emerging role of English as an inter-Nordic lingua franca vis-à-vis the traditional Scandinavian preference for *nabosprogsforståelse* (neighbouring-language comprehension), favouring own-language exchanges in (at least) Scandinavia. This practice, an example of what has been termed "semicommunication" (Haugen 1966), is still found in private as well as some business and academic settings. It means that in Scandinavian encounters, speakers of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish may all speak their own language, albeit in a slightly "pan-Scandinavian" fashion. A typical example of such communicative compromises is the avoidance among Danes

to use their numerals for numbers above twenty. So when speaking to other Scandinavians, Danes often replace numerals like 72, in Danish *to og halvfjerds* (two and seventy) – based on the Germanic "ones before tens" principle, combined with the French "twenties rather than tens" principle, as in *soixante-douze* (sixty and twelve) – with the mock-Scandinavian *syvtito* (seventy-two).

As this example may imply, Danish is often seen as the "problem child" (Gooskens 2006) of inter-Scandinavian communication, especially when spoken, as changes in Danish pronunciation have developed faster than changes in spoken Norwegian and Swedish (see also Schüppert in this issue). As pointed out by Einar Haugen, "Norwegian pronunciation agrees with Danish spelling better than does Danish pronunciation" (1966, 288). In written texts, inter-Scandinavian similarities are more obvious, as developments in Danish orthography have not caught up with the fast-paced changes in spoken Danish.

Accordingly, in speech mutual intelligibility is challenged, as Danish is now so far removed from the common Nordic point of departure that more than 90% of young Swedes find it difficult to understand spoken Danish, and 42% switch to English (Bacquin and Zola Christensen 2013, 13).

1.1 The Watershed between Language and Dialect

When focusing on the (lack of) mutual intelligibility between individuals speaking different languages, the notion of *language* – as opposed to *dialect* – needs clarification. As often found when analysing issues related to human culture, the terminology regarding language vis-à-vis dialect is basically of a political nature. The following example will show this: China, with its 1.4 billion inhabitants, is claimed by the authorities to have only one language understood by all (Mandarin Chinese aka *Putonghua*) plus several dialects, including Cantonese. At the same time, Scandinavia, with merely 22 million people – and since 1905 consisting of three independent kingdoms – is said to be the home of three languages (Danish, Norwegian and Swedish) plus their many dialects. How can that be?

The reason is that the self-perception of a Chinese citizen vs. a Scandinavian differs regarding linguistic identity. Often subconsciously, the "one nation, one language" conception thrives in minor as well as major countries, and this reveals differing definitions of "language" and "dialect".

To people in multi-nation Europe, including trained linguists, a language is "foreign" when you have to learn it to understand its speakers. As a monolingual European, you understand someone only if that person speaks your own language – possibly in another dialect. However, as a monolingual Chinese, you may not understand what a fellow Chinese says, but you still consider that person a speaker of Chinese – in fact, a *reader* of Chinese. The point is that in China, the non-alphabetic script, which is (almost) the same across what Europeans will consider different languages, makes the various "dialects" mutually comprehensible when *written*. In Europe (and elsewhere), for a language variant to qualify as a dialect, mutual comprehension should be possible in *oral* communication.

However, even by European standards, the distinction between dialect and language is not easily drawn. As pointed out already in the mid-20th century, the "popular impression that dialects are mutually intelligible, while languages are not" (Haugen 1966, 280) does not match sociolinguistic realities: "Experience with actual dialects and languages, as these are commonly defined by linguists, contradicts this idea" (*ibidem*). In defining "language", social and political factors sometimes overrule strictly linguistic criteria.

1.2 Contact Scenarios and Intelligibility among Speakers of the Nordic Languages

If we include indirect contact scenarios, four basic types of language contact offer themselves, as shown in Table 1:

Type of scenario	**Direct contact**	**Indirect contact**
Symmetrical	(1) Danish-Swedish	(3) English-French (before the UK joined the EU in 1972)
Non-symmetrical	(2) Danish-Faroese	(4) English-Danish (due to Anglo-American influence)

Tab. 1 – A concise typology of language contact scenarios

Type 1 may be seen as an ideal type of contact, in the shape of mutual exchange, between speakers of two (almost) equally powerful languages. However, this form of "balanced" direct contact scenario is not the typical one in today's world: not only are indirect contact scenarios (types 3 and 4) more frequent than type 1 scenarios; non-symmetrical scenarios (types 2 and 4) – often with English as the dominant language – are also more common.

Ever since the middle of the 20th century, English has been the prime driver of neologisms in the Nordic countries, while Danish has played a similar, dominant role in the development of Greenlandic and Faroese – languages with no proven influence on Danish.

As a reaction to unwanted foreign influence, then mostly from German, the last centuries have seen several waves of pro-Nordic cultural and linguistic movements, the first of which manifesting itself in events like the "nordiske retskrivningsmøde" (Nordic orthography conference) in Stockholm in 1869. The vision behind that conference was to maintain and expand the bond between the three Scandinavian languages, ideally seen as dialects, "saa at ethvert individ af en af de tre Skandinaviske nationer i sit modersmaal kan tale med og forstaaes af ethvert individ af de to andre, og at sprogforskjelligheden blot er en dialektforskjel, der ikke hindrer den fuldkomne forstaaelse" (Norwegian language guardian Ole Jacob Broch in 1864, quoted in Hansen 2008, 61).[1]

As illustrated here, the linguistic default for inter-Scandinavian communication was – and to a certain extent, still is – to use one's mother tongue in exchanges with fellow Scandinavians. In other words, Danes, Norwegians and Swedes were supposed to understand each other (a symmetrical scenario) while speaking their own language. This scenario implied that speakers of other languages of the Nordic region (i.e. Finnish, Sami, Icelandic and Faroese) were expected to understand and speak at least one of the three Scandinavian languages, without their own languages being understood by Scandinavians (a non-symmetrical scenario). However, although to a large extent Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are connected via common *nyordsdanning* (coining of new words) (Våge *et al.* 2017, 107), inter-Scandinavian language comprehension has been declining for decades. A report from 2005 (see Delsing and Åkesson 2005) found that young Danes, Swedes and Norwegians were less able to understand each other's languages than was the case a generation earlier, as found in a 1972 survey (Maurud 1976; see also the comparison in Lund 2011). This development tallies well with the fact that pan-Nordic language policies are no longer *en vogue*: "I vore dage er tanken om en aktiv nordisk sprogpolitik stort set opgivet" (Heidemann *et al.* 2004, 150).[2]

[1] Trans.: So that each individual of one of the three Scandinavian nations in his mother tongue can speak to and be understood by every individual of the two others, and that the linguistic difference is merely a dialectal difference that does not impede perfect comprehension. Unless othewise stated, all translations are mine.

[2] Trans.: These days, the idea of an active Nordic language policy is by and large abandoned.

The following section presents the various intelligibility scenarios found between (young) speakers of the major heritage languages of the Nordic countries, including Greenland. Using the above-mentioned criterion of oral comprehension as a watershed between language and dialect, it should be pointed out that among the altogether nine languages presented in Table 2, Sami is an umbrella term rather than a specific language; many of the so-called Sami dialects are in fact languages in their own right. Thus, a recent work on Sami history operates with nine Sami languages (*språk*) (Berg-Nordlie 2024, 20) – of which North Sami (aka Sami) is spoken by some 90% of all Sami speakers.[3] Likewise, what is listed as Greenlandic (*Kalaallisut*), an official language in Greenland, is in reality West Greenlandic, a language partly incomprehensible to speakers of the lesser-spoken East Greenlandic. Finally, "Norwegian" covers the two mutually comprehensible written variants Bokmål and Nynorsk, while Finland-Swedish is a language-political entity rather than a *bona fide* language separate from Swedish spoken in Sweden.

Table 2 is an overview of the more or less reciprocal intelligibility scenarios among young speakers of the heritage languages of the Nordic countries – including Finland, Iceland and all parts of the Danish *Rigsfællesskab* (Commonwealth) consisting of Denmark, The Faroe Islands and Greenland.

Speakers of: / **Languages understood:**	Danish	Norwegian	Swedish	Finland-Swedish	Faroese	Icelandic	Finnish	Sami	Greenlandic	Total
Danish		**6.1**	**3.8**	**3.6**	**8.3**	**5.4**	**1.5**	2	**6.6**	37.3
Norwegian	**4.2**		**5.0**	**4.8**	**7.0**	**3.4**	**1.6**	7	**3.7**	36.7
Swedish	**3.5**	**6.2**		10	**5.8**	**3.3**	**3.2**	7	**2.2**	41.2
Finland-Swedish	4	6	10		6	5	6	7	3	47
Faroese	1	2	0	0		7	0	0	0	10
Icelandic	0	1	0	0	6		0	0	0	7
Finnish	0	0	0	9	0	0		5	0	14
Sami	0	0	0	0	0	0	2		0	2
Greenlandic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0
Total	12.7	21.3	18.8	27.4	33.1	24.1	14.3	28	15.5	——
English	7	7	7	7	7	8	6	5	5	58

Tab. 2 – A tentative survey of oral mutual intelligibility in the Nordic countries

For lack of more recent data, the figures in Table 2 are partly based on Delsing and Åkesson (2005; scores in boldface) and partly my own approximations (inspired by Gooskens 2006; Brink 2018) of Nordic native speakers' average intelligibility of native speakers of the other Nordic national (in the case of Sami: regional) languages, and of English.[4] Zero ratings indicate no intelligibility, while scenarios with perfect comprehension of language A by speakers of language B would score 10 points.

[3] According to Jussi Ylikoski, Professor of Finno-Ugric Linguistics (personal communication, June 2025).

[4] Interestingly, no studies on Sami speakers' comprehension of other Sami languages or Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish seem to exist (Professor Jussi Ylikoski, personal communication, May 2025).

High (one-way) intelligibility (scores from 5 to 10) is highlighted in green, limited intelligibility (from 2 to 4.9) is yellow, low intelligibility (1.0 to 1.9) is orange, and red indicates zero intelligibility. As all figures reflect unidirectional (oral) comprehension, full mutual comprehension is found only between high, matching figures on both sides of the "white" diagonal – a situation not attested at all. The closest thing to such mutual comprehension is communication between speakers of Swedish and Norwegian – yielding rather modest scores of 5.0 for Swedes' comprehension of Norwegian against 6.2 in the opposite direction.

As seen in Table 2, many Nordic contact situations are non-symmetrical, involving speakers of a dominant and speakers of a dominated language. For instance, Faroese speakers understand spoken Danish (which they learn in school) at 8.3, against a Danish estimated score of 1. Similarly, the average Sami person listening to Swedish may score around 7 points, while the typical Swede will score no points at all when listening to Sami.

Interestingly, a non-Scandinavian speech community seems to obtain the best results overall: the 70,000 speakers of Faroese, the smallest national Nordic language, score a comprehension total of 33.1 points, with high (green) comprehension of five languages. Danes turn out as losers in this inter-Nordic contest: not a single Nordic language is understood well by (young) Danes; with a score of 4.2, even the closely related Norwegian achieves only limited intelligibility.

Moving from the speaker to the language perspective, the figures show that English prevails as the best-suited lingua franca in the Nordic countries. Not only will Finnish speakers benefit from the choice of English; it seems that speakers of most of the languages involved here are well served by English, too – especially as this language is now mastered by all Nordic peoples (European Union 2024).

Thus, if the estimated English comprehension scores of 5 and above prove to be empirically valid, today almost everybody in the North Atlantic sphere will understand (most of) what is said when communicating in English. And in Scandinavia, in their daily lives, Swedes and Norwegians are typically more familiar with English than with Danish, a language not taught in schools in their countries (Gooskens 2006, 238). All this leads to English playing an increasingly important role in inter-Nordic communication, even between speakers of the three Scandinavian languages (Bacquin and Zola Christensen 2013). As Danes, Norwegians and Swedes are all expected to score 7 in English comprehension, embarrassing non-symmetrical scenarios (typically, whenever Danish is involved) are avoided when everybody speaks their second-best language, English. Ironically, the limited mutual intelligibility between Swedish and Danish speakers may in fact justify the "political" labelling of Danish and Swedish as different languages and not dialects of the same language.

Summing up, English seems to have gained an important foothold in inter-Nordic communication. But where does this penchant for English leave the national languages? This question will be dealt with in the following sections.

1.3 Sprogforbistring, Nabosprog, Fremmedsprog: Key Notions in Inter-Scandinavian Communication

In the 1930s, after centuries of strong Low and High German influence on Danish (Winge 2000), the German language – rather than English – was still seen as a threat to the well-being of Danish and to inter-Scandinavian intelligibility. In a new pan-Scandinavian wave, purist-minded linguists and language custodians noticed signs of diminishing mutual understanding between speakers of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, and the Danish self-appointed language guardian Sven Clausen (1938) coined the term *sprogforbistring* (literally "language confusion") for this phenomenon. Yet, German was still a useful *lingua franca*. As late as c. 1950, a Norwegian civil

servant, unable to understand spoken Danish, was quoted for saying: "When I am in Copenhagen, I ask the waiters to speak German" (Haugen 1966, 296).

Since the 1950s, with English now the dominant language in the Nordic region, *sprogforbistring* has continued to impede mutual understanding between speakers of languages that abroad might be classified as merely dialects (see Holst Pape 2013).

In inter-Nordic discussions, the opposite of *sprogforbistring* has long been the much-praised concept of *nabosprogsforståelse*. Ideally, at least Danes, Norwegians and Swedes are expected to understand each other's languages – although, based on the European definitions sketched out in Section 1.1, only dialects, not *bona fide* languages, should be mutually intelligible. This paradox is often ignored by Scandinavian linguists, who take it for granted that Danes, Swedes and Norwegians speak three different languages while at the same time expected – without any formal training – to understand each other. Yet, as we saw in the previous section, realities seem far from the ideal of mutual inter-Scandinavian intelligibility, while English offers itself as a quick fix.

Since the Second World War, with the ever-growing English influence on all Nordic languages, no studies have shown any increase in inter-Scandinavian mutual understanding. On the contrary, hardly any Scandinavians listen to radio shows in the neighbouring languages anymore – as opposed to the 41% of Danish and 52% of Norwegian respondents who did just that around 1950 (Haugen 1966, 287). Similarly, Scandinavian TV programmes and films are always subtitled when shown in the neighbouring countries, and literature – even very popular Danish, Norwegian and Swedish crime fiction – is always read in translation. Today the only situation in which Scandinavians are forced to understand each other is physical or online encounters, when English is often resorted to.

However, although still fewer Scandinavians watch TV shows produced in neighbouring countries (Bacquin and Zola Christensen 2013, 7-8), such productions occasionally lead to increased interest in *nabosprog*. An example of this was the immensely popular Norwegian youth series *Skam*, watched (with Norwegian subtitles) by many Danish teenagers on the Norwegian TV channel NRK in 2016 and on Danish TV (with Danish subtitles) in 2017 (Rathje 2018). A survey found that no less than 96% of the Danish teenagers who watched the show with Norwegian subtitles (and 70% of those who watched it with Danish subtitles) said that they understood Norwegian better after watching the series (Lassen 2018, 12).

Yet, to many Swedes and Danes, the notion of *nabosprog* is losing its meaning:

> Når vi om hundrede år kigger tilbage til den tid, vi befinder os i nu, er det altså muligt, at vi vil se tilbage på en periode, fra slutningen af det tyvende århundrede til et stykke ind i det enogtyvende, hvor dansk og svensk gik *fra at være nabosprog til at blive fremmedsprog.* (Bacquin and Zola Christensen 2013, 2; my italics)[5]

The authors of this study add: "De unge i begge lande anser, at det er let til meget let at forstå mundtlig engelsk. De er altså af den opfattelse, at de begriber engelsk betydeligt bedre end deres geografiske nabosprog" (12).[6]

In an attempt to avoid total domain loss of the heritage languages in such communicative scenarios and "surrender" to English as a salvaging lingua franca, maybe if Scandinavians could all speak a mix of their national language and English, mutual understanding would increase,

[5] Trans.: When in one hundred years we look back at the present time, we may view a period, from the late 20th into the 21st century, when Danish and Swedish *shifted from being neighbouring into being foreign languages*.

[6] Trans.: Our young respondents in both countries find it easy or very easy to understand spoken English. They believe they are much better at understanding English than the geographical neighbouring language.

to the benefit of all? This scenario may sound unrealistic, even ridiculous (Ohlsson 1977, 25), but as the following sections will illustrate, English loanwords already introduced in the three Scandinavian languages may assist in maintaining a minimum of mutual intelligibility. The very idea that English import words might help Scandinavians understand each other was not at all considered earlier: "Any convergence in the languages […] can […] only come about […] through political union or, failing that, through intense social contact […]" (Haugen 1966, 295).

No wonder that as part of the ongoing language-political discussion on the role of English in the Nordic region, Danish language professor Jørn Lund has stated: "Lettest går fremmedordene igennem; som regel låner de skandinaviske sprog de samme fremmedord" (Lund 2000,104).[7] This was also pointed out by Einar Haugen, who mentions "common influences from outside the area as factors that may keep intra-Scandinavian intelligibility on track" (Haugen 2009, 129).

Likewise, in reply to the popular lamentation of the *sprogforbistring* found when "computer" was baptised *datamat* in Danish, *datamaskin* in Norwegian and *dator* in Swedish, a senior researcher at the Danish Language Council wrote: "en seriøs vurdering må jo også medtage alle de nye ord der vitterlig er fælles" (Riber Petersen 1977, 54).[8] And even here, English has had an effect: in 21st-century Danish, nobody uses the term *datamat*; all Danes say *computer* – a term understood by all Scandinavians.

2. The English Influence on the Scandinavian Languages

Having presented and aimed at quantifying the challenges of the diminishing mutual comprehension in the Nordic region while touching the role of English, we will now focus on quantifying and evaluating the present English influence on Danish, Swedish and Norwegian. Does this influence somehow support convergence between the languages, or does it add to the *sprogforbistring*?

2.1 The Visibility of Anglicisms

In today's Scandinavian societies, the command of English is generally high, with Norway, Sweden and Denmark rated as having "Very high proficiency" (*EF English Proficiency Index* 2024). All over Scandinavia, English is now a second rather than a foreign language, and as expressed in a Danish report on the present status of English in the speech of young Danes, "[h]ovedsproget er dansk, men engelske ord, udtryk og hele sætninger er en integreret del af sproget" (Lønsmann *et al*. 2024, 92).[9] As opposed to these young respondents, earlier generations of Danes rarely use code-switching, but for more than a century, most new loanwords in Denmark, as in Scandinavia, have been based on English. For Danish, not only do English-based words (i.e. Anglicisms) make up a majority of all new *loanwords*; Anglicisms constitute between 67% and 87% of *all* new words in the language (Gottlieb 2025, 17). For Norwegian and Swedish, similar statistics for the share of neologisms with Anglophone roots seem unavailable, but the fact that a large number of the Anglicisms analysed in this study are found in all three Scandinavian languages leaves no doubt that even in Swedish and Norwegian – often considered more purist than Danish – Anglicisms make up a significant share of all new words and expressions.

[7] Trans.: Most intelligible are the foreign words; usually the Scandinavian languages borrow the same loanwords.

[8] Trans.: a serious evaluation should also consider all the new words that are in fact shared.

[9] Trans.: the main language is Danish, but English words, expressions and entire sentences constitute an integral part of the language.

Before proceeding, the key term "Anglicism" needs to be defined. Taking heed of the many types of English influence on other languages, the following scholarly definition of "Anglicism" offers itself: "Any individual or systemic language feature adapted or adopted from English, or inspired or boosted by English models, used in intralingual communication in a speech community in which English is not the home language" (Gottileb 2020, 32).

This means that Anglicisms need not look or sound English; what counts is the fact that all Anglicisms rest on Anglophone models. *Unadapted* direct borrowings from English are easily identifiable as Anglicisms and thus often referred to as "visible" (Gottileb 2023c and 2025, 15). Conversely, many *adapted* borrowings as well as all *indirect* borrowings from English – including loan translations and semantic loans – may be labeled "invisible".

To illustrate the wide range of Anglicisms in modern languages, the following section will present the various linguistic levels and Anglicism types, with Danish examples and dates for earliest (written) attestations:

Visible Anglicisms may:

- represent new concepts or phenomena: *whisky* (1755); *woke* (2017);
- fill an existing void: *panorama* (1830); *stalker* (1996);
- make known entities sound new: *cool* (1958); *coach* (1969).

No matter which functions such Anglicisms serve, or to which word class they belong, they look and/or sound English.

Invisible Anglicisms are found in all linguistic fields:

a) **Phonology**: Original English (yet Danish-looking) spelling, with adapted pronunciation:
film (1902) (with Danish *stød*, i.e. glottal stop);
database (1970) (four syllables, no diphthongs).

b) **Orthography**: Adapted spelling and pronunciation:
splejse (1804) <"splice"; *dørtræk* (1928) <"dirt track" (racing); *nørd* (1985) <"nerd".

c) **Morphology**: Loan translation of compounds:
ekkokammer (2009) <"echo chamber"; *genforvildning* (2016) <"rewilding".

d) **Phraseology**: Morphosyntactic calquing:
gå planken ud (1910) <"walk the plank"; *når det kommer til...*(1984) <"when it comes to…".

e) **Semantics**: Alternative meaning:
mus (1983) <"(computer) mouse"; *adressere* (1991) <"address" (= deal with).

f) **Pragmatics**: English-inspired discourse:
et godt spørgsmål (1990) <"a good question";
Tak for din tid! (2004) <"Thanks for your time!".

Often overlooked in discussions (and dictionaries) of Anglicisms, invisible Anglicisms as exemplified above constitute a considerable share of all English-based elements in the Scandinavian languages. Thus, invisible types accounted for 30.5% of the Danish online neology dictionary NoiD's 2024 Anglicism harvest – matching the "invisible" share of 26.7% of all Danish Anglicisms in GLAD, the Global Anglicism Database (Gottlieb 2025, 15).

2.2 The Adaptation of Anglicisms in the Scandinavian Languages[10]

As all other *-isms*, Anglicisms are the offspring of two separate languages and not simply exact replicas of their etymons, i.e. the models of the donor language. Presenting three basic aspects of any lexeme (pronunciation, spelling and meaning), Table 3 shows how all possible combinations of maintenance (shown in green) vs. alteration (in red) of the three aspects of English etymons are found in contemporary Swedish, Danish and Norwegian Anglicisms:

Category	Features	Danish	Norwegian	Swedish
1	Identical pronunciation Identical spelling Identical meaning	*band*	*world music*	*team*
2	Altered pronunciation Identical spelling Identical meaning	*radar*	*multiple choice*	*sulky*
3	Identical pronunciation Altered spelling Identical meaning	*lørner* (“learner”)	*steelgitar* (“steel guitar”)	*hajk* (“hike”)
4	Identical pronunciation Identical spelling Altered meaning	*bake-off* (= half-baked bread)	*chips* (= potato crisps)	*city* (= town center)
5	Altered pronunciation Altered spelling Identical meaning	*pingvin* (“penguin”)	*hilite* (verb) (“highlight”)	*jobb* (“job”)
6	Altered pronunciation Identical spelling Altered meaning	*rocker* (= biker)	*calling* (= intercom)	*hammock* (= outdoor sofa)
7	Identical pronunciation Altered spelling Altered meaning	*hej* (= goodbye <“hi”)	*klin* (= totally <“clean”)	*hoj* (= bicycle <“hoy”)
8	Altered pronunciation Altered spelling Altered meaning	*sparre* (= practice with <“spar”)	*tøff* (= smart <“tough”)	*rostbiff* (= rumpsteak <“roast beef”)

Tab. 3 – Adaptation of Anglicisms: a typology of changes

As is clearly seen, anything can happen when people outside the Anglosphere gain interest in an English lexeme. What may support mutual intelligibility among Scandinavians – while harming their ability to make themselves understood by English native speakers – are especially words of categories 4, 6, 7 and 8. Such pseudo-Anglicisms are often used in their non-English senses when Scandinavians communicate in English. A typical example is the (Danish) pseudo-Anglicism *sparre*, which to Danes has a positive flavor and is often used of workplace situations where people challenge each other in a friendly manner. In English the verb “spar”, originally a boxing term, is used in a much more aggressive sense, leading to miscommunication in international encounters.[11]

[10] This and the following sections are based on sections in Gottlieb 2023b.

[11] The phenomenon of pseudo-Anglicisms is dealt with extensively in Furiassi and Gottlieb 2015 and Van der Sijs *et al.* 2026.

3. Are "The Same" Anglicisms Introduced Across Scandinavia?

When discussing the role that "foreign words" – and thus Anglicisms – may play in the context of inter-Scandinavian mutual intelligibility (see Section 1.3), we need to know to which extent Danish, Norwegian and Swedish speakers use similar Anglicisms. To that end, we will

(1) compare the inventory (aka *richness*) of Anglicisms in printed *Anglicism dictionaries* with that of the online *Global Anglicism Database* (GLAD; Instituut Voor De Nederlandse Taal. 2023);[12]

(2) compare these findings with the inventory of Anglicisms in *standard dictionaries*;

(3) analyse the usage (*frequency*) of selected Anglicisms in major Scandinavian *text corpora*.

3.1 Types of Anglicisms in Scandinavian Anglicism Dictionaries

Prior to the present *Global Anglicism Database* – now presenting thousands of Anglicisms in Danish, Norwegian and fifteen other languages[13]– the English influence on the Nordic languages was documented in the following Anglicism dictionaries, none of which have been updated since their publication:

Danish: *A Dictionary of Anglicisms in Danish* (DAD; Sørensen 1997);
Norwegian: *Anglisismeordboka. Engelske lånord i norsk* (AO; Graedler and Johansson 1997);
Entries included in *A Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (DEA; Görlach 2001);
Swedish: *Ny svengelsk ordbok* (NSO; Seltén 1993);
A Dictionary of Anglicisms in Swedish (DAS; Antunović 1999);
Icelandic: Entries included in *A Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (DEA; Görlach 2001);
Finnish: Entries included in *A Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (DEA; Görlach 2001);
Faroese: Word list in *English loanwords in Faroese* (ELF; Jóansson 1997).

As reflected in the number of entries listed in Table 4, these Nordic listings of Anglicisms rest on differing definitions of "Anglicism" – and, of course, on differing success in compiling entries. As a result, especially invisible types suffer from these discrepancies. The editors of AO are fully aware that their Norwegian dictionary misses out on indirect (invisible) loans: "Grunnen til dette er at *slike indirekte lån ofte er vanskeligere å oppdage*, og derfor dårligere representert i grunnlagsmaterialet for boka" (Graedler and Johansson 1997, 11; my italics).[14]

Anglicism type	**Danish**		**Norwegian**			**Swedish**		**Ice-landic**	**Finnish**	**Faroese**
	DAD	GLAD	AO	DEA	GLAD	NSO	DAS	DEA	DEA	ELF
Unadapted	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Adapted	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Loan translation	√	√	Very few	Very few	√	None	None	Very few	Very few	√

[12] For more information on the GLAD project, including languages and criteria for inclusion, see Gottlieb *et al.* 2018, Gottlieb 2021 and 2023a.

[13] Unfortunately, Swedish is still not represented in GLAD. Potential contributors for Swedish are invited to contact the author.

[14] Trans.: The reason for this is that such indirect borrowings are often more difficult to detect, and hence less well represented in the material that this book is based on.

Semantic loan	√	√	Very few	None	√	None	None	None	None	None
Hybrid[15]	√	√	√	√	√	√	A few	√	√	√
Pseudo-loan	√	√	√	√	√	√	Very few	√	√	Very few
Types fully included	6	6	4	4	6	4	2	4	4	4
Entries[16]	6,180	15,653	>4,000	2,906	7,386	2,093	c.1,500	1,516	1,125	c. 1,485

Tab. 4 – Scandinavian Anglicism dictionaries: differing criteria for inclusion

Of the printed dictionaries, only the Danish DAD includes all the Anglicism types necessary to chart the English influence on recipient languages, e.g. those used in Scandinavia.

3.2 Randomly Selected Items in Scandinavian Anglicism Dictionaries

The first part of this inter-Scandinavian comparison looks at a type of Anglicism included in all the above-mentioned dictionaries: direct borrowing of single words, unadapted as well as adapted.

Starting with the Norwegian GLAD contribution – consisting of 7,388 Anglicisms – 15 words were selected, alphabetically separated by exactly 500 entries. This randomisation ensures alphabetical balance and allows for variation regarding word class and stylistic level.

Although no less than 14 out of the 15 Norwegian Anglicisms have direct counterparts in the Danish GLAD contribution, only seven (AO) and three (DEA) of these fifteen are included in the two Norwegian Anglicism dictionaries, while five are listed in the Danish Anglicism dictionary (DAD). The Swedish Anglicism dictionaries present an even more humble result: only one of the 15 words is included in each of them.

Judging from these (printed) sources, one may therefore conclude that the three Scandinavian languages differ considerably with regard to English influence – counterproductive to inter-Scandinavian *nabosprogsforståelse*. Table 5 juxtaposes the (lack of) presence of the 15 items in the dictionaries vis-à-vis GLAD:

Danish		**Norwegian**			**Swedish**	
GLAD	**DAD**	**GLAD**	**AO**	**DEA**	**NSO**	**DAS**
behaviourist	–	behaviourist	–	–	–	+
callboy	–	call-boy	–	+	–	–
dead end	–	dead end	+	–	–	–
event	+	event	–	–	–	–
førsteslag	–	førsteslag	–	–	–	–

[15] Hybrids are half-translations of compounds, with one element left untranslated, as in Norwegian *speedbåt* <"speedboat".

[16] Numbers of entries in DEA are based on the figures reported in Görlach 2003, 163-64.

hit	–	hit/hitt[17]	+	–	–	–
just-in-time	–	just-in-time	+	+	+	–
location	–	location	+	–	–	–
naile	Ø	naile[18]	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
ph.d.	+	ph.d.	+	–	–	–
replay	–	replay	+	+	–	–
skygge	+	skygge[19]	–	–	–	–
–	–	submersibel	+	–	–	–
tryghedszone	–	komfortsone	–	–	–	–
yorkshire pudding	+	yorkshirepudding	–	–	–	–
14	5	15	7	3	1	1

Tab. 5 – None of the 15 randomly selected Anglicisms is included in all Anglicism dictionaries

As we will later see, 14 out of these 15 single-word Anglicisms were in fact already introduced in several of the three languages by 1990, before the time of publication of the five Anglicism dictionaries. And fortunately, the parallel introduction of these fifteen randomly selected items is backed up by more recent (standard) dictionaries of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish.

3.3 Randomly Selected Items in Scandinavian Standard Dictionaries

Table 6 presents an altogether different picture of the situation regarding the 15 single-word Anglicisms. The standard dictionaries compared are *Den Danske Ordbog* (DDO), *Nye Ord i Dansk 1955 til i dag* (NoiD), *ordbøkene.no* (OB), *Det Norske Akademis Ordbok* (NAOB), *Svenska Akademiens ordlista* (SAOL), and *Svensk ordbok* (SO) – all of which include more of the 15 Anglicisms than the specialised Anglicism dictionaries:

Danish		**Norwegian**			**Swedish**	
DDO	NOiD	GLAD	OB[20]	NAOB	SAOL	SO
+	Ø[21]	behaviourist	+/+	+	+	+
–	+	call-boy	–/–	+	–	–
–	–	dead end	–/–	(+)	–	–
+	+	event	+/+	+	+	+
–	–	førsteslag	–/–	+	+[22]	+

[17] In the sense "occurrence" (not "popular song" etc.).
[18] This verb was introduced in these languages after the publication of the dictionaries, hence the "Ø" label.
[19] In the sense "monitor", from English "shadow (a suspect)".
[20] This dictionary covers Bokmål as well as Nynorsk. A plus or minus mark to the left of the slash refers to Bokmål; the mark to the right refers to Nynorsk.
[21] As NOiD is a dictionary of neologisms, pre-1955 Anglicisms are not included, hence the Ø sign.
[22] SAOL & SO have *förstaslagsförmåga*.

+	+	hit/hitt	+/+	+	(+)[23]	(+)
–	–	just-in-time	–/–	+	–	–
+	+	location	+/+	+	–	–
–	+	naile	–/–	+	–	–
+	+	ph.d.	+/+	+	–	–
–	–	replay	–/–	+	–	–
+	Ø	skygge	+/+	+	+	+
–	–	submersibel	+/–	+	–	–
tryghedszone, komfortzone, comfortzone		komfortsone	+/+	+	–	–
–	Ø	yorkshirepudding	–/–	–	–	–
7	7	15	8/7	15	5	5

Tab. 6 – Four of the Anglicisms are found in all the standard dictionaries of the three languages

The four "identical" Anglicisms found in all three languages (highlighted in red in Table 6) indicate that – as opposed to what the dedicated Anglicism dictionaries implied – quite a number of Anglicisms are in fact shared by the three Scandinavian speech communities. This parallelism will prove even more conspicuous when we later turn to (English-based) multi-word units.

3.4 Anglicism Frequencies in Scandinavian Online Text Corpora

The third type of source for investigating the lexis of the Scandinavian languages is text corpora. Still focusing on single-word Anglicisms, we now move from investigating Anglicism richness to looking at usage frequencies.

3.4.1 The Frequencies of Much-used Anglicisms in Danish

Via parallel searches in January 2023 in *Korpus TiDK* and *Infomedia* (huge Danish text corpora), the Norwegian *Aviskorpus* and the Swedish *KORP*, counts were made of the absolute and relative occurrences of the 15 Anglicisms whose inclusion in dictionaries was covered in the previous sections. Before revealing the frequencies of these items, let us see how "rare" even very well-known Anglicisms turn out to be.

To show this, I searched the Danish *KorpusTiDK* (a news-media based corpus of 365 million running words) for four popular and highly frequent Danish Anglicisms, each representing one word class: *computer*, *okay*, *grøn(ne)* (followed by *omstilling*) and *tænke(r) at*. In Table 7 we see that none of these words and expressions, frequently used since 2010 by nearly all Danes in speech and writing, is used more than 39 times for every million running words:

[23] SAOL & SO do not have the sense "occurrence", only "popular song".

Word/expression	Class	English etymon	Anglicism type	Frequency 2020
computer	Noun	computer	Direct Borrowing	20 ppm[24]
okay	Interjection	okay	Direct Borrowing	29 ppm
grøn(ne)(omstilling)	Adjective	green (revolution)	Semantic Loan	35 ppm
tænke(r) at …	Verb	think that …	Loan Translation	39 ppm

Tab. 7– Frequent Danish Anglicisms with values between 20 and 40 ppm

Figure 1 shows the trajectories of *computer*, *okay*, *grøn(ne)omstilling* og *tænker at* (including *tænker, at*) over the decade 2011-2020:

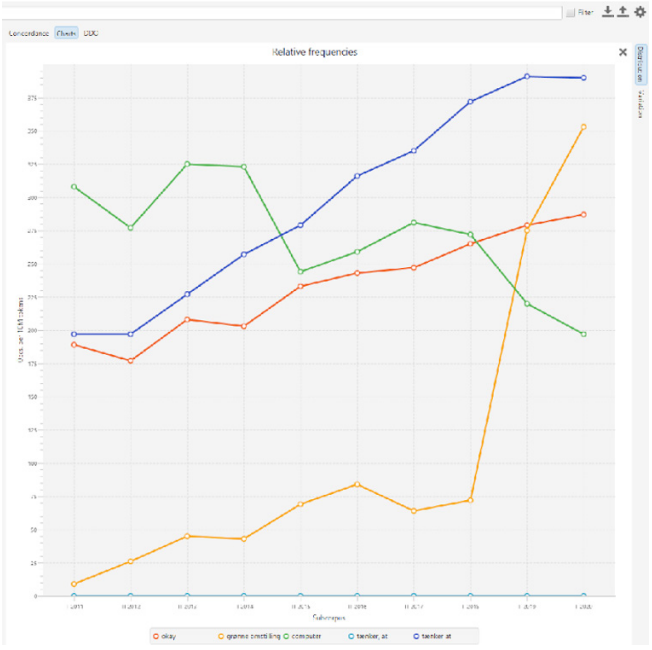

Fig. 1 – The trajectory of four frequent Anglicisms in Danish news media 2011-2020

3.4.2 The Frequencies of Randomly Selected Items in Scandinavian Online Text Corpora

Seeing that none of the above-mentioned well-known Danish Anglicisms obtain corpus frequencies above 40 ppm, we must realise that even items with nominally very low frequencies should be considered for inclusion in dictionaries and databases. Thus, the Danish GLAD contribution operates with a threshold of 0.008 ppm, corresponding to the vocabulary of educated adult speakers (Gottlieb 2021). The feasibility of this "low" value is proven by the data in the following two tables showing the frequency figures of our (rather well-known) fifteen randomly selected single-word Anglicisms found in the above-mentioned Danish (Table 8), Norwegian and Swedish corpora (Table 9):

[24] ppm = parts per million.

Danish					
GLAD 2023	**Korpus TiDK** (2011-20) 365 million words			**Infomedia** (1990-2023)[25] 40,000millionwords	
	2011 ppm	2020 ppm	2011-20 hits	1990-2023	
				hits	ppm
behaviourist	0.005		2	68	0.002
callboy	0.011		4	30	0.001
dead end	> 0.025		> 9	> 163	> 0.004
event	> 2.5	> 3.0	>1,004	> 36,226	**> 0.91**
førsteslag	0.008		3	92	0.002
hit	> 16.1	>11.2	> 5,371	> 129,149	**> 3.23**
just-in-time	0.085		31	3,078	0.08
location	1.4	1.1	469	49,625	**1.24**
naile	0.022		8	269	0.007
ph.d.	1.7	0.6	334	203,179	**5.08**
replay	> 0.008		> 3	221	0.006
skygge[26]	> 0.052		> 19	> 2,304	> 0.06
submersibel	0.003		1	10	0.000
komfortzone	0.1	0.7	175	7,888	**0.20**
tryghedszone	0.2	0.1	50	1,455	0.04
yorkshire pudding	0.027		10	298	0.007
					Average: 0.68

Tab. 8 – Frequencies in Danish corpora

Only four of these randomly selected Anglicisms (highlighted in green) obtain frequencies in *KorpusTiDK* of at least 1 ppm. Even more noticeable, only two additional Anglicisms – both based on the etymon "comfort zone" – score more than 0.1 ppm (in blue). Six additional items score between 0.008 and 0.1 ppm (in yellow), while the frequencies of *førsteslag* and *replay* (in orange) are at, or slightly above, the threshold. Finally, *behaviourist* and *submersibel* (in red) fail to reach the 0.008 ppm.

Even lower, yet more statistically significant, values are offered by the huge *Infomedia* news archive of some 40 billion words. Here only half of the 16 Anglicisms obtain scores of above the 0.008 ppm threshold, with a total average frequency of merely 0.68 ppm.

We will now compare the Danish data with the Norwegian and Swedish figures:

[25] As of January 20, 2023, Infomedia included 86 million news items of approximately 460 words, a total of 39.56 billion running words.

[26] Search node: "blev skygget".

Norwegian (Bokmål)			Swedish		
GLAD 2023 (year of earliest attestation)	**Aviskorpus** (1998-2020) 2,127 millionwords			**KORP** (2002-2022) 243 millionwords	
	hits	ppm		hits	ppm
behaviourist (1948)	1	0.000	behaviourist	0	0
call-boy (1975)	3	0.001	call-boy	0	0
dead end (1966)	14	0.007	dead end	2	0.008
(en) event (1967)	58	0.027	(ett) event	132	0.54
førsteslag (1971)	28	**0.013**	förstaslag	2	0.008
(en) hit (1960)	3,602	1.69	(en) hit	111	0.46
(en) hitt	4	0.002			
just-in-time (1987)	38	0.018	just-in-time	34	0.058
location (1952)	802	0.38	location	8	0.033
naile (1992)	22	0.010	naile/nejle	0	0
ph.d. (1989)	25	0.012	ph.d.	0	0
(et) replay (1953)	1	0.000	replay	2	0.008
skygge (1931) [27]	> 72	> 0.034	skugga[28]	> 21	**>0.086**
submersibel (1966)	0	0	submersibel	0	0
komfortsone (1964)	409	0.19	komfortzon	13	0.053
trygghetssone (1984)	16	0.008	trygghetszon	13	0.053
yorkshirepudding (1879)	6	0.003	yorkshirepudding	0	0
		Average 0.15			Average 0.08

Tab. 9 – Frequencies in Norwegian and Swedish corpora

The Norwegian figures in Table 9 show that only the polysemous Anglicism *hit* (in green) obtains a frequency of more than 1 ppm, and only two other words (in blue) make it above 0.1 ppm. Nine Anglicisms appear with a frequency above the 0.008 threshold, and the average frequency is as low as 0.15 ppm.

The Swedish average is even lower, at 0.08 ppm – yet ten times the suggested minimum value – with only two (blue) Anglicisms at more than 0.1 ppm, and a total of just seven Anglicisms above the 0.008 ppm threshold value.

Comparing the three languages, we see that five of the Anglicisms (figures in bold face in the far right column of Table 8) are most common in Danish, while only the loan translation *førsteslag* and the semantic loan *skugga* are most common in Norwegian and Swedish, respectively (Table 9).

Tables 8 and 9 show that Danish leads with regard to Anglicism frequency – provided that the respective corpora yield commensurable data. As they all contain large amounts of texts from

[27] Search node: "ble skygget".
[28] Search node: "ble skuggat".

various news media and cover almost the same period, comparisons between the languages seem valid. Yet, even relatively large corpora like *Korpus TiDK*, *Aviskorpus* and *KORP* (the smallest of them all) may represent certain statistical inaccuracies when dealing with low-frequency items as the Anglicisms under scrutiny here.

Still, it seems fair to say that, at least in the news media, the Danish variants of our randomly selected Anglicisms are markedly more frequent than their Norwegian and Swedish counterparts:

- Four of the Danish Anglicisms (*event*, *hit*, *location*, *ph.d.*) obtain frequency scores of above 1 ppm, against only one Norwegian (*hit*) and no Swedish Anglicism.
- The average frequency of the Danish Anglicisms (0.68 ppm) is more than four times that of the Norwegian figure (0.15 ppm) and eight times the Swedish figure (0.08 ppm).

3.5 The Adaptation and Frequencies of Multi-word Anglicisms

We will now investigate the Scandinavian echoes of 14 English compound nouns and multi-word expressions. These complex Anglicisms show large variation, both in terms of visibility, style and word class, and except for the early loan translations of the boxing term "throw in the towel", they have all been discussed in the Scandinavian media and/or the scholarly literature.

Table 10 shows the 14 English etymons with their 15 derived Scandinavian Anglicisms. It is striking that in the three speech communities, people have made almost the same choices between direct borrowing and translation of the English expressions:

Etymon	**Danish**	**Norwegian**	**Swedish**
business as usual	business as usual	business as usual	business as usual
shit happens	shit happens	shit happens	shit happens
worst-case scenario	worst-case scenario	worst case scenario	worst case scenario
from scratch	fra scratch	fra scratch	från scratch
(no) free lunch	(ingen/en) gratis frokost	(ingen/en) gratis lunsj	fri lunch
side-effect	sideeffekt	sideeffekt	sidoeffekt
address (a problem)	adressere	adressere	adressera
make a difference	gøre en forskel	gjøre en forskjell	göra skillnad[29]
(go the) extra mile	(gå en/den) ekstra mil	(gå den) ekstra milen	(gå den) extra milen
throw in the towel	(kaste/smide) håndklædet i ringen	kaste inn håndkleet	kasta in handduken
(put your) foot down	(sætte) foden ned	(sette) foten ned	(sätta) ner foten
(not) rocket science	(ikke) raketvidenskab	(ikke) raketvitenskap	(ingen) raketvetenskap
	(ikke) rocket science	(ikke) rocket science	(ingen) rocket science
when it comes to	når det kommer til[30]	når det kommer til	när det kommer till[31]
on a daily basis	på daglig basis	på daglig basis	på daglig basis

Tab. 10 – The Scandinavian echoes of English multi-word units

[29] Searches excluding "på".
[30] Searches excluding "stykket".
[31] Searches excluding "kritan".

Such Anglicisms have been the subject of several studies in the individual Scandinavian languages (e.g. Mickwitz 2007; Gottlieb 2012 and 2023c; Andersen 2022). Also contrastive studies have been published: the article "Three Cases of Phraseological Borrowing" compares the expressions *as if*, *Oh wait* and *ever* in corpora of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish social media texts. In his conclusion, the author states as follows (Andersen 2020, 7): "It is remarkable to which degree the three Scandinavian languages display similarities in the formal and functional adaptation of these pragmatic items". Another study (Andersen and Gottlieb 2026), comparing Danish and Norwegian Anglicisms in GLAD, found "a high degree of consistency regarding the inventory of phraseological Anglicisms across the two languages" (229).

Table 11 shows that such inter-Scandinavian parallel developments regarding the formal features of phraseological Anglicisms also apply to the frequencies of these Anglicisms in text corpora:

Anglicism (shared; Danish; Norwegian; Swedish)	**Danish**		**Norwegian**		**Swedish**	
	Infomedia		**Aviskorpus**		**KORP**	
	hits	ppm	hits	ppm	hits	ppm
business as usual	19,380	0.48	1,143	**0.54**	104	0.43
shit happens	1,726	0.04	84	0.04	9	0.04
worst-case scenario	5,153	**0.13**	253	0.12	20	0.08
fra / fra / från scratch	6,259	0.16	443	**0.21**	37	0.15
gratis frokost / gratis lunsj / fri lunch	401	0.01	114	0.05	5	0.02
sideeffekt / sideeffekt / sidoeffekt	16,839	**0.42**	329	0.15	60	0.25
adressere / adressere / adressera	90,028	2.25	1,817	0.85	669	**2.75**
gøre en forskel / gjøre en forskjell / göra skillnad	316,519	**7.91**	3,452	1.62	1,119	4.60
ekstra mil / ekstra milen / extra milen	3,705	0.09	32	0.02	1	0.004
kaste / smide håndklædet i ringen / kaste inn håndkleet / kasta in handduken	70,068	1.75	5,950	**2.80**	386	1.59
foden ned / foten ned / ner foten	7,753	0.19	6,980	3.28	911	**3.75**
raketvidenskab / raketvitenskap / raketvetenskap / rocket science	10,845	**0.27**	0	0	1	0.004
	1,050	0.03	23	0.01	10	0.04
når det kommer til / når det kommer til / när det kommer till	410,231	10.26	18,678	8.78	3,388	**13.94**
på daglig basis	25,377	**0.63**	743	0.35	87	0.35
Average scores Wins (highest scores in boldface)	Danish: 1.64 **5 wins**		Norwegian: 1.25 3 wins		Swedish:**1.87** 3 wins	

Tab. 11 – Strikingly similar frequencies of English-based multi-word units across Scandinavia

Despite the considerable differences in size – and, accordingly, in numbers of hits – the three Scandinavian corpora yield frequencies of the same magnitude. While, for instance, *business as usual* occurs 19,380 times in the Danish *Infomedia* but "only" 104 times in the Swedish *KORP*, the frequencies are almost identical: 0.48 and 0.43 ppm. Five of the Anglicisms are most

frequent in Danish, against three in Norwegian and another three in Swedish – a rather close race in comparison with the total dominance of Danish regarding the "random" Anglicisms (see the *Infomedia* scores in Table 8). Interestingly, this time Swedish has the highest average score; the 1.87 ppm for these multi-word Anglicisms is more than 20 times higher than the Swedish average for the "random" items.

4. Conclusion: Anglicisms as Inter-Scandinavian Stepping Stones?

When looking for similarities between the inventory (richness) of English-based words and expressions in the three Scandinavian languages, standard dictionaries and (for Norwegian and Danish) the GLAD database turn out to be much more useful (and truthful) than the various Anglicism dictionaries. Not only are these works outdated, as they were all conceived in the 1990s; their differing criteria for inclusion of entries make cross-language comparisons problematic.

As for actual usage, searches in comparable text corpora produce much more valid data, and Danish, Norwegian and Swedish online corpora present a surprisingly uniform picture of Anglicism types and frequencies in contemporary Danish, Swedish and Norwegian.

Most of the randomly selected Norwegian entries in GLAD (typically unadapted single-word items) are not only introduced in Danish and Swedish; they typically appear in the same shape. This cross-linguistic similarity is even more pronounced when it comes to the more salient phraseological Anglicisms, where speakers in the three speech communities have made almost the same adaptational choices between direct (visible) borrowing and indirect (invisible) loan translation of the English phrasemes in question (see Table 10).

To an even larger extent than the randomly selected Anglicisms, the English-based multi-word units prove to be part of the common stock of the three Scandinavian languages. With frequencies in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish of up to 20 times the ones found for the "simple" words, these more complex Anglicisms (often semantic loans or loan translations) are almost equally popular in all three Scandinavian speech communities – and may thus contribute to counteract continued deterioration of the inter-Scandinavian *nabosprogsforståelse*.

In other words, with their mostly positive connotations (at least to those who use them), the various types of present-day Anglicisms may help maintain a modicum of mutual intelligibility in Scandinavia. Using recognisable (whether visible or invisible) Anglicisms, typically content words or expressions with emotional power, young and old Scandinavians may continue to communicate without resorting to "real" English.

Whether the many Anglicisms in Scandinavian neology, although generators of convergence between the languages, will in fact contribute to improve cross-border intelligibility will need to be tested empirically. To the best of my knowledge, this has not yet been tried.

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Swedish L1 High-stakes Exam in Finland Poised Between the Local and the Global

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OPEN ACCESS

Citation: S. Stolt, J. Lassus (2026) Swedish L1 High-stakes Exam in Finland Poised Between the Local and the Global. Serie speciale "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: pp. 75-88. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-16294.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract

In this article, we give a corpus-based overview of traces of influence from foreign languages that can be found in Matriculation Examination essays written by Swedish L1 speakers in Finland. We place our findings in an educational context where the Swedish L1 test, and especially its essay, requires formal language use and adaptation towards the prevailing Swedish language norms. Even in this high-stakes exam with high demands on normative language use, the influence of foreign languages can be seen. This study also provides an overview of the Matriculation Examination as a high-stakes exam that measures the extent to which the examinees have achieved maturity and readiness for further studies.

Keywords: Essays, High-stakes Exam, Matriculation Examination, Normative Language, Swedish L1

Introduction

Language proficiency testing is associated with L2 teaching and assessment. However, there are also L1 language tests and examinations which seem to receive less attention in applied linguistics. One such L1 examination is part of the Finnish Matriculation Examination arranged at the end of the upper secondary school education (*gymnasium*). The only mandatory test in the Matriculation Examination is the test in Mother Tongue and Literature in either Finnish or Swedish, the L1 language, depending on the language of instruction at the educational institution. The test measures the extent to which the examinee has achieved the objectives set out in the upper secondary school curriculum and the extent to which they have achieved maturity and readiness for further studies (Lag om studentexamen 502/2019).

The Matriculation Examination functions both as an exit exam and a high-stakes exam, marking successful completion of school and regulating entry to higher education (Matriculation Examination Board 2025; Myers 2021). The exam results play a crucial role in admissions to higher education. Thus, the pressure on the examinees is high as they must perform at their very best (Klein and van Ackeren 2011). From the point of view of social constructivism and systemic-functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen 2013), both the context of language use and the society at large affect language choices and language use. A language in a minority position is affected by the other languages surrounding it; Swedish in Finland is affected by the majority language Finnish and the ubiquitous L2 English. Influences from other languages are not seen as a benefit in a test where a written standard Swedish variety is rewarded, according to the assessment criteria (Studentexamensnämnden 2025). The test in Mother Tongue and Literature requires formal language use and adaptation towards the prevailing Swedish language norms (Forsskåhl *et al.* 2020).

In this article, our aim is twofold: first, to present the Swedish Mother Tongue and Literature test, hereafter called the Swedish L1 test, and second, to present how languages other than Swedish affect the language used in exam answers from 2021 and 2022. The article is structured as follows. We start by providing some background about the linguistic situation in Finland. After that, we present the Swedish L1 exam, to meet the first aim. The second aim is met by presenting the empirical analysis of influences from other languages than Swedish.

1. Swedish in Finland

In this section, we provide some background on Swedish in Finland. In the Swedish L1 test answers the standard Swedish written variety is expected, according to the assessment criteria. Swedish is a pluricentric language, but Swedish in Finland follows the same linguistic norms as Swedish in Sweden (Norrby *et al.* 2021). Standard Swedish is expected in writing at all levels of education.

Swedish is one of the two official languages in Finland according to the Constitution and Swedish is spoken as the first language by around 5% of the population in Finland (Statistics Finland 2024). The other official language, Finnish, is spoken by 84%. The education system in Finland is almost identical in Finnish and Swedish, and there is Swedish schooling from kindergarten to university.

Minority languages face challenges. Swedish in Finland is used in a society that is largely Finnish-speaking, and its speakers live in a translated reality (Tandefelt 2017). There are some influences from the Finnish majority language, e.g. loanwords and direct translations (*finlandismer*), but the degree of this varies greatly between different regions in Finland. Some Swedish-speaking Finns grow up with both Swedish and Finnish as their home language while others may grow up in an almost monolingual Swedish environment (Oker-Blom 2021, 27-33). Although the Swedish language in Finland is viable and strongly anchored in the standardised Swedish language, it is not an isolated language but affected also by English. Swedish often functions as a minority language in important domains such as science, commerce, and technology. As a result, Swedish risks losing its function in these domains, which in turn can weaken the language proficiency of its speakers (Mattfolk 2011). Mattfolk states that young Finland-Swedes show deficits in language proficiency and feel insecure in their mother tongue, which can be linked to the influence of other languages, especially Finnish and English (15-16).

It is not primarily Finnish that is challenging the position of Swedish in Finland, but rather the country's increasing multilingualism and the rise of English (Kairos Future 2020;

Lassus and Stolt forthcoming). The increased use of English in media and popular culture in Scandinavia has been pointed out by Beers Fägersten (2023), and the development is similar in Finland. Young people follow news in social media rather than through traditional channels (Markelin, Salovaara and Wrede-Jäntti 2024). In these channels, the content is international, i.e., the media content is largely in English. Based on Kepsu and Markelin (2021), around 35% use English for oral communication in the digital environment.

As languages interact with the surrounding society, it is natural that there are influences from other languages also in texts written in educational settings (Granskog, Gustafsson and Stolt 2022). However, considering the future and working life, it is important that Finland-Swedes know the standard Swedish language norm, as Swedish is a key to cooperation and business in Scandinavia (Lassus and Tanner 2019).

The linguistic background among Swedish speakers in Finland is diverse, and Martola (2009), among others, believes that Finland-Swedish is facing major linguistic changes. Overall, there is a concern that the Swedish L1 is losing its function in important areas of society (Mickwitz 2008). Sandøy and Östman (2004) express concern that L1 language may be weakened as English becomes more prominent, emphasising the importance of preserving and demonstrating knowledge of one's mother tongue. According to the researchers, mastering and using one's L1 is crucial if one does not wish it to disappear. There is an ethical responsibility to protect and promote one's L1, especially in a world where other languages dominate. There are language policy measures: both in Finland and in the other Nordic countries language policy programmes have emphasised the importance of strengthening the minority languages as a counterweight to the dominance of English (Mattfolk 2011).

2. Previous Research

Research on the Mother Tongue and Literature test in the Matriculation Examination is scarce. Most of the research is on older test versions before the tests were in digital form. A major project, Kielitaidon kirjo – Språklig mångfald (Kauppinen *et al.* 2011), combined different analyses of the Finnish L1 test and the Swedish L1 test. Later, a group of researchers studied good and weak answers in the Swedish L1 test (Forsskåhl *et al.* 2020). Some research has also been done on the Finnish task verbs and other aspects of the tests, but as mentioned, to our knowledge there is no research on the Finnish L1 nor Swedish L1 digital matriculation examination. Previous research on the older test formats has been either quantitative, dealing with points and grades, or qualitative, based on close readings or assessments (Stolt 2016). Some studies have used Ivanič's writing discourses (2004) or Bakhtin's idea (1981) that all language is fundamentally dialogical, to capture the nature of the (older) essays and examinees' voice(s) (e.g. Silén 2020; Juvonen 2015).

When it comes to linguistic influences and changes in Finland-Swedish, there is some research, but the language of Finland-Swedish upper secondary school students has been studied to a limited extent. The most comprehensive study is Melin-Köpilä's (1996), who in her doctoral thesis examines Finnish influence on the Swedish language of pupils and upper secondary school students in the early 1990s. This study is somewhat dated now, and the other above-mentioned studies focused on old tests, so we do not know much about the current situation. Most earlier research has also been done before the breakthrough of internet and social media available in English on every smartphone. Evaluation reports of national assessments of learning outcomes in Swedish and literature in school year 9 (Hellgren and Marjanen 2020) show that pupils who intend to apply for upper secondary education have stronger knowledge

of their mother tongue than those who have other plans for upper secondary education, a result similar to Melin-Köpilä (1996).

In Sweden, the national test (*Nationella prov*) and its answers have raised some research interest that often focuses on non-linguistic perspectives. Palmér (2013) focuses on writing didactics discourses; Edander and Palmér (2020) on the role of writing instructions; Bendegard, Hussenius and Palmér (2024) on assessment perspectives; and Hallesson and Westman (2021) on intertextuality or how examinees tend to use exam materials as a resource in this kind of exam.

3. National Test and High-stakes Exams

The first aim of this article is to present the Finnish Matriculation Examination and especially the Swedish L1 test. We start by outlining the difference between a "national test" and a "high-stakes exam". Both are standardised tests with a national administration and centrally set examinations. They are instruments for systematic measuring and monitoring of the performance of individual pupils or students, schools, and national education systems. National tests are shaped by and developed in accordance with national policy agendas to maintain a comparable grading standards across schools. In high-stakes assessments, measured outcomes have direct consequences, most commonly for the pupil (Lorenz, Eickelmann and Bos 2016). According to Beck and Jeffery (2007), the positive view of high-stakes exams is that they raise standards for and encourage all students to achieve at higher levels.

National tests and high-stakes exams can consist of summative tests[1] that summarise the achievement of individual pupils or students at the end of a school year or of a particular educational stage and have a significant impact on their educational careers. National test results are used as indicators of the quality of teaching and the performance of teachers, but also to measure the overall effectiveness of education policies and practices and to identify an individual pupil's specific learning needs and adapting teaching accordingly.

Many countries in Europe use high-stakes exams that lead to higher education studies (van Ackeren *et al.* 2012; Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency and Eurydice 2009; European Commission; Klein and van Ackeren 2011). Here, we limit the study to the Nordic countries. In Denmark, high school ends with a matriculation examination with internet connection, but in Sweden the upper secondary education itself prepares the student for higher education studies (Skolverket 2025). The national test in Sweden does not assess students' knowledge in relation to the entire upper secondary school course, but the test result has a special significance in grading even if it is not an exit exam. In Norway, upper secondary education leads to a general university entrance diploma (Ståhle 2004; The Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers 2025). Next, we present the situation in Finland.

4. The Matriculation Examination in Finland and the Writing Skills Test

The Matriculation Examination in Finland is carried out as part of the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture, with the Matriculation Examination Board as the executing authority. The Matriculation Examination is a centralised and standardised digital test without connection to the internet or any spell checking. The exam is held nationwide biannually, consisting of a minimum of five tests. All examinees must take the Mother Tongue

[1] As opposed to summative tests, formative assessments/tests focus on the idea of "assessment for learning".

and Literature test, in either Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi. In addition, examinees are required to complete at least four other tests from the following subject groups: Mathematics, Second National Language, Foreign Language, Humanities and Natural Sciences (Matriculation Examination Board 2025). The Matriculation Examination is based on the curriculum of the upper secondary education (*gymnasium*) and results in a certificate with importance for future academic studies. Those who pass receive a certificate and the grades will affect their chances of admission to higher education.

The general upper secondary education school supervises the examination, and the teacher gives the preliminary points based on the assessment criteria for the test. After that, the board's assessors, called censors,[2] review the grading and determine the final points, after which the Matriculation Examination Board decides on the scale based on the points given and defines the grades. The grading system is anonymous and ensures fairness and comparability by using a standardised approach. The aim is to have properly comparable examinations and grades, allowing the reliable and fair use of Matriculation Examination grades for admissions to university and other higher education institutions (*ibidem*).

The test in Mother Tongue and Literature focuses on literacy skills and is evaluated by the assessment criteria of the Matriculation Examination as well as the criteria for good answers specific to the test (Studentexamensnämnden 2025). It has two parts: the writing skills test and the reading comprehension test. In this article, we focus on the former.

The writing skills test in Swedish L1 assesses the examinees' ability to express themselves in writing, as well as their ability to articulate thoughts and manage complex topics. The L1 essay in the writing skills test is a discursive text. It requires students to choose between provided source texts, test materials, and to write a reflective or opinionated essay of around 6,000 characters and manage thematic units. The test measures a distinct type of writing competence, associated more with academic literacy. The maximum score on the grading scale in the writing skills test is 60 points and the minimum 0 points. A score of 40 points indicates that the examinee has a good command of the norms of standard Swedish.

The test material for the essay is authentic and multimodal, and it can therefore contain non-standard language (*ibidem*). Even so, the test answers require formal, standard Swedish language use and knowledge of the normative written language. Influences from other languages are seen as less appropriate in this context. The expected written standard variety is learnt in school, while the language outside school is characterised by both regional and global influences. The assessment of the writing skills test emphasises the overall picture of writing competence, the structure, handling of the material, and the language and style. The assessors highlight weaknesses and linguistic inaccuracies in relation to the standard norm, described in the assessment criteria table under the heading *Language and style* (*ibidem*). There may be language errors, but for the highest grades, the examinee must have nearly flawless language.

In language contact situations, language-mixing is not recommended by language experts, and English is sometimes even seen as a threat to Swedish (Bylin and Melander 2023, 93-99). When words are borrowed, a morphological adaptation is often recommended (to rave > rejva; *ibidem*). In the next section, we meet our second aim and present how influences from other languages are visible in the exam answers, essays written by Swedish L1 speakers in Finland.

[2] Both authors of this article work as censors (assessors) for the Matriculation Examination Board.

5. Material and Method

This study is based on part of the *Studex-19-24* corpus in the Language Bank of Finland (Kielipankki), more specifically on the essays from spring 2021 and spring 2022, amounting to about 5.3 million tokens. The essays were annotated at the University of Helsinki using the Sparv tool (Hammarstedt *et al*. 2022) and the restricted corpus can be accessed via the Korp interface (Borin, Forsberg and Roxendal 2012) after research permission from the Matriculation Examination Board.[3]

The exam answers in the Swedish L1 tests are not openly available. To do research on this data, research permission from the Matriculation Examination Board is needed, which we have. To compile the corpus *Studex-19-24*, we also obtained a corpus permission. We do not know the identities of the examinees and the exam answers are split into graphical sentences, i.e. we do not have access to whole texts. We follow the Finnish code of conduct for research integrity (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2023). Although there may be personal identifiers in individual sentences, such as personal names or place names, we do not use such sentences in our public presentations or articles. Through these measures, we do our best not to reveal any identifiable information on any examinee, school, or censor.

The empirical analysis focuses on lexicon and has two phases with different methods. In the first phase, we use quantitative corpus linguistics (Biber 2015) to find linguistic examples in our data. For this article, we compiled from the subsets "spring 21" and "spring 22" of *Studex-19-24* corpus a list of words that the Sparv tool annotated as a "foreign word". This category is used when Sparv cannot identify the word in its Swedish word list and assign it a Swedish word class. This list with about 4200 entries was filtered and sorted by codes[4] so that we could build a list with phrases with "foreign words". We noted spelling mistakes (e.g., "acquired taste" can be difficult to spell) and narrowed down the single words to phrases, ending up with about 950 phrases that could be analysed manually. Some of these are single utterances, only used once. In this study, we focus on the most frequent phrases.

In the second phase, we do a qualitative analysis of the findings, i.e. the most frequent phrases from the analysis of "foreign words". In previous research on language contact, there have been suggestions of categories such as "lexical borrowing" or categories that focus on the degree of semantic similarity or how the borrowed item works in interaction (Hilmisdóttir and Peterson 2023). We work inductively and do not use given categories when sorting and grouping the phrases. The steps in our categorisation were to 1) identify the language or other reason for the annotation "foreign word" (in some cases, misspelling was the reason); 2) compare the phrase to the test materials; 3) group the phrases that were not part of the test materials according to their language, possible original contexts, and type of "foreign word". We used our linguistic expertise of different languages and our knowledge of the exam and its materials.

Of course, not all words influenced by other languages are found in this list. In this way, as in most corpus linguistic analyses, we only find what Sparv has identified and annotated as a "foreign word". This method allows us to find spelling mistakes if the word is misspelled in such a way that it cannot be recognised, but many spelling mistakes are not that severe: for example, *financiell* instead of *finansiell* ("financial"). However, this method cannot capture neologisms influenced by other languages if the words "look Swedish", that is, follow Swedish morphology.

[3] The annotation was made by Erik Axelson.
[4] The sorting and filtering were done by research assistant Kasper Sundström.

To investigate whether the test materials have affected the test results, we analysed in step 2 the test materials used in the exams spring 2021 and spring 2022 with the AntConc programme (Anthony 2022). We compared the test materials to the "foreign word" list. This was important, as some of the materials dealt with languages and multilingualism and contained quotations in different languages.

6. Influence From the Test Materials

In step 2 of our analysis, we identified which phrases in the list of "foreign words" are found in the test materials. The test materials are authentic texts, with authentic language use, including non-standard varieties and foreign languages. That examinees use test materials as a resource has been proved by, for instance, Hallesson and Westman (2021), and we can see that the examinees in the Swedish L1 test did the same. In spring 2021 (Yle Abimix 2021), when the theme of the test was nationality, the test material contained foreign words and expressions, and not only in English and Finnish. There were several data sources with English names in a video (e.g., the world happiness report), song lyrics in both Finnish and English and the name *Eurovision Song Contest*. Many of the phrases in foreign languages are found in a text by Tito Colliander, given in the test material. There is also a video with a Swedish regional variety represented with expressions like "å he va bästa somare"[5]. Even if the expression is intelligible to us as Swedish speakers, the Sparv annotation tool does not understand what "he" (*det*) is and what word class to annotate it with, so it annotates the word as a "foreign word". In the following sections, we present results of our analysis on quotes from the test material with a special focus on influences from English.

7. Quotations from the Test Materials

There are some frequent expressions and phrases marked as "foreign word" that were found in the test materials. We will start by examining three of the most frequently used phrases that have their origin in the test materials, hereafter only "materials".

In spring 2021 (Yle Abimix), in the materials there is a song called *Vår tid – Vårt Land* with some language mixing in the lyrics. From this song, the examinees rather frequently quote in Finnish "Ja tänne varmaan aina tervetullut oot"[6]. Another quotation from the song, less frequently used, is "Remember that we love you from our hearts".

Besides the two song quotations, in spring 2021 there was also frequent use of the expression "acquired taste". This is used in spring 2021 in a column by Peter Al Fakir: "Finland är precis som sitt kök, en 'acquired taste' "[7] (*ibidem*). A third frequently used phrase is "political correctness". This phrase is found in the materials in spring 2022 in a column by Måns Nyberg: "Sedan har vi kraven utifrån political correctness (också detta tydligen ett svenskt uttryck numera)" (Yle Abimix 2022)[8]. Besides these, there are also some other expressions in

[5] Studentexamensnämnden, *Exempel på olika svenskspråkiga dialekter*, <https://svenska-content.ylestatic.fi/abimix/2022/var/OE-sv/attachments/C.mp4> (01/2026).Trans.: and that was the best summer. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the authors.

[6] Trans.: and you are probably always welcome here.

[7] Trans.: Finland is exactly as its cuisine, an acquired taste.

[8] Trans.: then we have the requirements based on political correctness (also this is obviously a Swedish expression nowadays).

English that have their origin in the materials: "Eurovision Song Contest", "my home is my castle", "world wide web", "lockdown".

The columnist Al Fakir used quotation marks around "acquired taste". In spring 2021, the 58 instances of this phrase either use quotation marks around it or the phrase is in a longer quotation from the material with simple quotation marks. This example illustrates this: "Och jag gissar att Finland därför inte är för alla, utan en 'acquired taste' som Fakir sa"[9].

The phrase "political correctness" was used without quotation marks in the material. When the examinees used it in spring 2022, in 28 instances of 49 they used quotation marks around the phrase, signalling awareness that this is not Swedish and not standard. However, there are 21 instances where it was not enclosed in quotation marks but imported directly into the text, as in this example: "Vi är definitivt inte vid det skedet ännu i frågan om political correctness, men man ska aldrig ta språkets politiska neutralitet för givet"[10].

It is obvious that the materials influenced the examinees' texts, as these phrases were used in texts from the corresponding spring: the Finnish quotation and "acquired taste" were used in spring 2021 and "political correctness" in spring 2022. We also checked whether the materials' expressions were translated into Swedish and used as a resource in the essays. In one sentence *speciell smak* ("a certain taste") was used in spring 2021 in reference to the column where "acquired taste" was used. There are no instances of the Swedish equivalent to "political correctness", *politisk korrekthet*, in spring 2022. These materials thus give the examinees linguistic resources for their writing, but they have not translated them into Swedish.

Conversely, there is a group of words in Swedish in the material that led to translations into English in the essays. In spring 2022 (Yle Abimix 2022), there was a material with neologisms, new words (*nyord*), in Swedish. The material contains *cancelkultur* and *mjuta*, which led the examinees to explain these words in English, thus resulting in many instances of "mute" and "cancel", "cancel culture" and "cancelled". For "mute", *mjuta*, the examinees could use Swedish phrases (*tysta mikrofonen* or *stäng av mikrofonen*). For "cancel", "cancel culture" and "cancelled", the expressions did occur a few times in the essays from 2021, but not in the test material. In spring 2022, the Swedish neologism *cancelkultur* was in one of the materials that listed new words. In modern English, "cancel" can mean that someone is not supported or liked anymore, or perhaps they are even boycotted (Lendvai 2025). There are some alternatives in Swedish that could be used (e.g., *utfryst*, *impopulär*) but the examinees chose to use the English word as in: "Ingen människa är perfekt, inte heller de människor som skriver cancel åt alla"[11]. In this sentence, the examinee wants to explain the phenomenon of writing "cancel" in the comments in social media, which not easily translated into Swedish.

8. The Other "Foreign Words"

In step three, we analysed the "foreign words" that had no explicit connection to the test materials. Almost half of these were of English origin and a fifth of Finnish origin. Among the remaining hits, there were single words from German, Italian, French, Russian, Greek, Latin, Chinese and Spanish. Some of these, such as "vice versa" are lexicalised and accepted in

[9] Trans.: and I guess that is why Finland is not for all, but an "acquired taste" as Fakir said.

[10] Trans.: we are definitely not in that phase yet concerning political correctness, but one should never take the political neutrality of a language for granted.

[11] Trans.: nobody is perfect, not even the people that write cancel to everyone.

Swedish. There were also some Swedish dialectal expressions, many of them, but not all, from the materials. We will focus on the words of English origin, as they form the biggest subgroup.

First, we want to emphasise that (besides the most frequent phrases used) there are not many instances of English expressions or words in the group "foreign words". Even if a phrase was used ten times or more, the relative frequency is low as there are 5.3 million tokens in the data we examined. Some expressions with a Latin background are used in both English and Swedish, such as "lingua franca".

The English loanwords that are not given in the materials but by the examinees themselves reflect our current society and global trends. The movement Black Lives Matter really engaged the examinees. It is not used in the materials, but in spring 2021 there were 60 instances of the phrase, and in spring 2022 there were 14 instances. As we see only one sentence of the text in the corpus, and not what precedes or follows it, we cannot tell for all instances what the context is. Nevertheless, many examinees also wrote about MeToo and other protest movements in the same sentence, and of racism: "Exempel på det här är black lives matter rörelsen och rörelser mot klimatförändringen"[12] and "Rasismen har gett upphov till rörelser såsom Black Lives Matter"[13].

The phrase "comfort zone" has an equivalent in Swedish, *bekvämlighetszon*, but the English phrase is preferred in the essays. However, there are also many instances of *bekvämlighetszon*. The following two examples, both from spring 2022, show how the English and Swedish words are used: "Att stiga ut från sin bekvämlighetszon är viktigt"[14] and "Ta i, stig ut från din comfort zone, lär dig ett nytt språk"[15].

Finally, there is a group of words that we connect to youth language and digital communication. "Cap", "Lol" and "laughing out loud" were used in spring 2022 as examples of new words that the examinees know and that are not in the materials.

There are also cases where we do not know if there is a mistake or spelling influenced by English. We suspect influence from English, as some words are almost identical in Swedish and English due to language contact with only minor spelling differences (Malmström and Pecorari 2022; Lindström 2004). There are some words in the "foreign word" group that might be spelling mistakes; one of them is "up". There are a few English quotations with "up" but most cases of "up" are spelling mistakes; in Swedish the word is spelled *upp* with two ps. Another one is "best", spelled like that instead of the Swedish *bäst*. Many of the examinees also used the English spelling of the word "racism" (Sw. *rasism*).

When using a corpus and looking at words annotated as "foreign word", it is always important to take a closer look at the context. For instance, the word "europe", annotated as a foreign word, could be interpreted as a misspelling of the name of the continent, which is *Europa* in Swedish. Instead, the examinees used "europe" for *europé*, "a European". It is a spelling mistake, but probably not influenced by English. It is more likely that in the stressful exam situation, the examinee does not have time to sort out how to type the accent mark on the e. The word "national" does not exist as such in Swedish but starts to exist when the examinees write words such as *nationalspråk* ("national language"), *nationalkänsla* ("national feeling") or *nationalidentitet* ("national identity") as two separate words: **national språk*, **national känsla* or **national identitet*. Sparv annotates the word "national" as a foreign word, but the examinee

[12] Trans.: examples of this are the black lives matter movement and movements against climate change.
[13] Trans.: racism has given rise to movements such as Black Lives Matter.
[14] Trans.: to step out from one's comfort zone is important.
[15] Trans.: make an effort, step out of your comfort zone, learn a new language.

just made a spelling mistake. However, this particular spelling mistake, the phenomenon of writing compound words as two separate words, in Swedish called *särskrivning*, is probably a result of influence from English.

9. Discussion

In this article, our aim has been to present the Swedish Mother Tongue and Literature test and how languages other than Swedish affect the language used in exam answers from 2021 and 2022. We have identified the L1 Swedish test as a high-stakes test with consequences for the future of the examinees. In the writing skills test, the examinees are required to use standard Swedish, and they are poised between the local and the global. Swedish in Finland, a local variety of a pluricentric language, is bound to the standard norms of Swedish (Norrby *et al.* 2021). At the same time, the Swedish speakers are surrounded by a Finnish-speaking community – and they are part of a global, digital English-speaking environment (Beers Fägersten 2023; Markelin, Salovaara and Wrede-Jäntti 2024).

The Swedish L1 test is the most important essay the examinees have written in their lives so far. Our study shows that apart from occasional phrases in other languages used in the test materials, there are traces of English in the exam answers. Some phrases of foreign origin are from the test materials (see Hallesson and Westman 2021), while others are not, such as influences of English spelling (see Hilmisdóttir and Peterson 2023). We see that the examinees are mostly aware of non-Swedish elements, and they use quotation marks to indicate this. With knowledge of English, the content can be understood, but it is not standard Swedish, and it fails to meet the expectations of the high-stakes exam, leading to lower points.

The material in our study is unique in the sense that the essays are unrevised and written by non-professional writers who do their very best to show their skills in writing. Therefore, the material shows the genuine level of knowledge of Swedish as an L1 language. Both as researchers and as censors, we often wonder if the examinees, the writers, are aware of what they are doing when they breach the linguistic norm. Do they know how to keep the languages separate and use influences from foreign languages consciously, or is this mixing of languages something they cannot stop doing, indicating a possible language change in written language (see Martola 2009)? Based on Mattfolk (2011), there seems to be a difference between explicit opinions and implicit attitudes. She argues that young people, when asked, believe that English words should be replaced by Swedish, but when tested, they attribute positive values to English words (6, 55-57). Also socially conscious attitudes can be detected: people adapt their language depending on the situation and interlocutor, which can lead to the displacement of the mother tongue in certain contexts if it is not actively maintained (56-57).

The languages of media, newspapers and academia all support these influences, and we know that people today are exposed to English in their daily lives (Beers Fägersten 2023). The English words and phrases that the examinees use and that are not given in the exam material reflect our current society and global trends.

Although society today encourages multilingualism, it is important to consciously preserve the L1 through language planning measures at the local level and to be able to demonstrate knowledge of the L1 on an individual level (Mickwitz 2008). Actively using a standard variety of one's mother tongue is one way to preserve it, and that requires knowledge of the language (Sandøy and Östman 2004). This requires the intake of texts and media written in good language and the presence of good role models. We know that language contact leads to language change, but we do not know the scope of this potential change in Finland Swedish.

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Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/bsfm-lea

Citation: J. Tidigs (2026) To Scandinavia with Love, or It's Complicated: Linguistic and Corporeal Border Dynamics in Johanna Frid's Nora eller Brinn Oslo Brinn. "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: pp. 89-101. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-16549.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

To Scandinavia with Love, or It's Complicated: Linguistic and Corporeal Border Dynamics in Johanna Frid's *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn*

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Abstract

The article is a study of border dynamics in Johanna Frid's novel *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* (2018). With a theoretical framework from literary multilingualism studies, the article shows how the topic of troubled borders between Scandinavian languages in the novel is entangled with questions of geographical, medial, emotional, and corporeal borders. The troubled dynamics of borders is shown to be a central organising factor in the text. In addition, the friction between the thematical treatment of languages and the text's multilingual praxis is analysed, focusing on its artistically productive effects regarding the experiences of the novel's readers.

Keywords: Bordering, Endometriosis, Literary Multilingualism, Scandinavia, Swedish Literature

Introduction

> Vi hade känt varandra i snart ett år, och varit kærester i några månader. Vi började få lättare att förstå varandra, språkförbistringen till trots. Man ska inte bara lära känna en annan människa och ett annat skandinaviskt språk, utan också hur den människan talar sitt eget skandinaviska språk. […] Den gradvisa förståelse jag trodde var rådande mellan grannländerna existerade överhuvudtaget inte; det krävdes Google translate, svett och långa tolkningsdiskussioner […]. (Frid 2018, 8-10)[1]

[1] Trans.: We had known each other for almost a year and been kærester [Danish for boyfriend and girlfriend; *kæreste* literally means "dearest"] for a few months. We started to understand each other more easily, despite the language

Contemporary Nordic literature is an arena where language borders are contested, transgressed and re-drawn. Works of fiction can make use of several languages and present reflections on languages and their relationship with each other. Subsequently, through both linguistic praxis and thematic treatment, such works can engage readers in reflective processes of language learning that are of literary importance.

Swedish author Johanna Frid's debut novel *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* (2018), in English "Nora or Burn Oslo Burn", is one such novel.[2] Linguistically and thematically, the novel is centred in Scandinavia, its countries, languages and borders. The novel's narrator-protagonist, the Swedish university student Johanna, is in a romantic relationship with Emil from Denmark. Early in their relationship, Johanna becomes obsessed with Emil's Norwegian ex-girlfriend Nora, whom she starts to stalk on social media. *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is a darkly humorous story of love, social media, the illness of endometriosis, Scandinavia and its languages. Using Facebook jargon, Johanna's relationship status regarding all these topics can be described as "it's complicated".

In this article, I explore the novel's multilingualism in terms of both linguistic praxis and thematic treatment from the viewpoint of border dynamics. By placing attention on border permeability, transgression and creation, it is possible, I argue, to show the intimate interconnectedness of the seemingly very different thematical threads of Scandinavia, languages, love, endometriosis, and social media that recur throughout the novel. Moreover, I argue that *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is an excellent example of how linguistically heterogeneous texts are not simply meant to be comprehended or decoded by readers; conversely, such texts are able to "perform" frictions of language learning and belonging; hence, they engage readers in processes of language learning.

After delineating the article's theoretical framework, I proceed to analyse the novel's treatment of Scandinavia and Scandinavian languages in connection with love, endometriosis and social media. This is followed by a discussion of the novel's linguistic praxis and its artistically productive tension with the novel's thematic treatment of language before reflecting on what this entails for the novel's readers.

1. Theoretical Framework: Literary Multilingualism, Linguistic Borders and Readers

Since literature is simultaneously an art form and a form of cultural and social expression, the meaning and consequences of literary multilingualism changes along with linguistic, societal and, not least, literary norms and paradigms. To grasp the effects of literary multilingualism, careful consideration should be given not only to its specific form in the text in question but also to the linguistic and literary norms that surround the text and its readers (Yildiz 2012, 25).

In Western literature, we cannot bypass the monolingual paradigm that has shaped society, literature and scholarship on literature and languages and which Yasemin Yildiz explores in her seminal *Beyond the Mother Tongue*. Within the monolingual paradigm, monolingualism:

barrier. You should not only get to know another person and another Scandinavian language, but also how that person speaks their own Scandinavian language. […] The gradual understanding I thought prevailed between the neighbouring countries did not exist at all; it required Google translate, sweat, and long discussions about interpretations […]. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations from Frid's novel into English are mine. In the case of multilingual passages, I have endeavoured to translate in a way that retains the multilingualism of the original. In the translations, non-English words are only given in italics if they are in italics in the original Swedish edition of the novel.

[2] At the time of its publication in 2018, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* garnered great critical attention and acclaim but has not yielded much scholarly attention. Hitherto, Mäkelä and colleagues' study on narrative and digital capital (Mäkelä *et al.* 2025) is the only research publication on the novel apart from some digitally archived undergraduate theses. The textual multilingualism of and/or the discussion on languages in the novel has not been acknowledged previously.

> constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one 'true' language only, their 'mother tongue' and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation. (2)

The monolingual paradigm not only leads to multilingual practices becoming obscured but also to "processes of monolingualization", "which have produced more monolingual subjects, more monolingual communities, and more monolingual institutions" (*ibidem*). The institutional levels include those of linguistics and literary studies. Although contemporary linguistics has abandoned the conception of artefactualised national languages (Blommaert 2010), the perception of languages as distinct entities, whole unto themselves, is a legacy of nationalist language ideology that has taken part in the structuring of the field of linguistics and which influences everyday conceptions of languages even today. In the field of literary studies, the monolingual paradigm has often led to the linguistic heterogeneity of literary texts to be obscured, something that literary multilingualism studies have attempted to rectify (see e.g., Yildiz 2012; Dembeck 2014). My reading of *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is in accordance with this "de-monolingualising" endeavour to draw attention to how a text which is easily read as monolingual, is in fact intensely multilingual and concerned with questions of language borders.

As part of the critical scrutiny of the monolingual paradigm, literary multilingualism studies have striven to question the very "multi-" in multilingualism, as the concept of languages as countable entities is a part of monolingual language ideology. Here, the figure of the border has been central (see e.g., Tidigs and Huss 2017; Kauranen, Huss and Grönstrand 2020). Literary multilingualism studies today are characterised by an increasing awareness of the dynamics of linguistic borders and their impact on literary texts and their readers. Traditionally, literary multilingualism was treated as a stable phenomenon concerning texts that contained several national languages and where the meaning of this multilingualism resided in the text, ready to be deciphered by the linguistically competent reader. This stance is increasingly being substituted for a study of literary multilingualism as a phenomenon where languages and linguistic borders are performed, in reading, by readers who differ but cannot be neatly categorised and whose affective responses to these texts are of real significance for the literary scholar (Tidigs and Huss 2017; Kleveland 2020, 183; Nykvist 2020; Tidigs and Bodin 2020; Tidigs 2020).

In this context, the figure of the border, not as a fact or object but as a "process", is central. In "How Do We Count a Language? Translation and Discontinuity", translation scholar Naoki Sakai has emphasised the processual and performative character of translation: "translation is not only a border crossing but also and preliminarily an act of drawing a border, of *bordering*" (2008, 83). Translation understood as bordering encompasses a process where the linguistic border is marked in the very act of border crossing: there is no translation without a linguistic border that is highlighted and manifested when it is crossed (82-83). In literary studies, Sakai's use of bordering has inspired scholars to describe the delicate and complex work that readers perform in the act of reading the linguistically heterogeneous text:

> Instead of defining the multilingual literary text as a definitive textual configuration containing a specific number of languages, we wish to argue […] for an understanding of the multilingual literary text that takes the reader into account, and especially how the text encourages the reader to engage in different bordering processes. (Tidigs and Huss 2017, 219)

Processes of translation occur not only in the multilingual text itself but also between text and reader. There is no ideal reader of multilingual texts; instead, partial fluency (Walkowitz 2015, 42-44) or even incomprehension can give rise to aesthetic effects among different readers. Instead of as a passive recipient, I have argued together with Markus Huss for "a focus on the reader as co-creator of the multilingual text" (Tidigs and Huss 2017, 210). Here, the linguistic competence of the reader is not static. As Kleveland has emphasised, the traditional categorisation of readers into an in-group or an out-group does not account for the fact that each reader possesses a unique linguistic and cultural competence, which is not static but in continual development (2020, 183). The reading of a text is an event that takes place at a certain place and time and at a certain point in this development (184); thus, the reader's contribution to the meaning-making process of literary multilingualism is contextual (193).

These developments in literary multilingualism studies inform my reading of *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* as a novel that exposes, questions and explores power asymmetries between languages and involves its readers in a learning process. It is a novel that is intensely occupied with questions of linguistic unity and fragmentation, comprehension and misunderstanding as well as borders and their permeability. These questions also exist at the core of literary multilingualism studies today.

2. Scandinavian Struggles

Scandinavian languages are neighbouring languages whose proximity is both geographical and linguistic (Gooskens 2024, 8). They are often given as a prime example of intercomprehension among languages; however, this mutual intelligibility is asymmetric due to both linguistic and extralinguistic factors; the asymmetry between Danish and Swedish is one of the most well-known cases (151). Danish speakers both understand and display more positive attitudes towards Swedish than vice versa (152-53 and 158). Such questions of intercomprehension and its asymmetries are central to *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn.* In the first chapter, Johanna relates the story of her relationship with Emil, which turns out to be a reflection on language learning and (un)intelligibility:

> Vi pluggade tillsammans, och jag kände mig oerhört dum som inte kunde urskilja något ur ordmassorna. När Emil och den andra danska studenten pratade den första undervisningsdagen slutade jag helt enkelt att lyssna. Det var värre än att ha en radio inställd mellan två stationer, mer som att försöka skölja ris i ett för grovt durkslag eller läsa i kaffesump. (Frid 2018, 9)[3]

> Emil hade hursomhelst lättare att förstå mig än jag honom när vi rökte på rasten, vilket gjorde samtalet egendomligt haltande. Det var första gången jag kom i kontakt med det ansiktsuttryck som jag senare lärde mig var standard för möten skandinavisktalande emellan – en stelnande fasa och en ovilja att ge uttryck för att man faktiskt inte förstår. De flesta föredrog att låta språkförbistringen och förvirringen växa så att samtalet så småningom rann ut i sanden. (9-10)[4]

[3] Trans.: We studied together, and I felt extremely stupid for not being able to distinguish anything from the masses of words. When Emil and the other Danish student spoke on the first day of class, I simply stopped listening. It was worse than having a radio tuned between two stations, more like trying to rinse rice in too coarse a colander or read coffee grounds.

[4] Trans.: In any case, Emil had an easier time understanding me than I him when we smoked during the break, which made the conversation strangely halting. It was the first time I came into contact with the facial expression that I later learned was standard for meetings between Scandinavian speakers – a freezing horror and an unwillingness to

The chapter highlights the painstaking and often unsuccessful work of inter-Scandinavian understanding, and the emphasis on struggle, confusion and halting conversation continues throughout the novel. As the passages show, the struggles are asymmetrical as Emil understands Johanna more easily and is less bothered by partial incomprehension: "Trots att de andra i klassen också tycktes ha svårigheter med kommunikationen verkade det inte bekomma varken honom eller hans landsman särskilt mycket" (9).[5]

Regardless of whether Johanna fails to understand Emil or is herself misunderstood, it is she who suffers. When her fingers get caught in a patio door and she screams out in pain and panic, it takes Emil a long time to react and come to her aid. He later explains: "Jag glemte hvad aj betyder på svensk" (41).[6] Even expressions of pain become lost in translation, and the border between languages seems absolute.

Still, Johanna continues to try to learn Danish and the difficulty of this task only serves to highlight her dedication, the origins of which she does not herself quite understand.[7] "Vår relation utvecklade sig i takt med min danskförståelse. I mars kunde jag lyssna på DR:s *Skønlitteratur på P1* och Emil frågade om vi var kærester" (11).[8] Although Johanna continually stresses the border between Danish and Swedish and her struggles to overcome it, language learning and romantic attachment are intimately intertwined.

With Emil's ex-girlfriend Nora, Norway and Norwegian enter the equation. Nora is a highly symbolic name, epitomising Norwegianness both through its phonetic similarity to Norge/Norway and through its reference to Norwegian literature's most famous heroine, Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. When Johanna reflects upon the name, the connection with normality predominates: "Hon skulle kunna heta Synnøve, eller Wenche eller Ragnhild men Nora var ett helt normalt namn. Norskt och normalt" (8).[9] To Johanna, Nora is equated with Norway, as well as with normality: she is beautiful, well-behaved and most of all flawless.

In comparison, Johanna describes herself as a "svensk galning"[10] (102) and as someone who is difficult in an untranslatable way: "Naturligtvis var jag för jobbig. Ett ord så fasansfullt att det inte ens kan översättas till danska" (66).[11] Just as normality is an intrinsic part of Nora's Norwegianness, being difficult is a part of Johanna's Swedishness. In her attempt to control her

express that you cannot actually understand. Most people preferred to let the language bewilderment and confusion grow so that the conversation eventually fizzled out into nothing.

[5] Trans.: Although the other classmates also seemed to experience difficulties with communication it did not seem to bother him or his fellow countryman very much.

[6] Trans.: I forgot what ow means in Swedish.

[7] "Även om danskan och svenskan är grannspråk är de ljudmässiga skillnaderna stora, avgörande ord och meningskonstruktioner skiljer sig markant från varandra. Med andra ord är det ett ambitiöst arbete. Men det var inte förälskelse som fick mig att vilja tränga in i dessa skillnader. Det var ingenting som gick att ta på, bara en plötslig målmedvetenhet. I december tyckte jag mig behärska språket nog för att träffa Emil på tu man hand" (Frid 2018, 10). Trans.: Even if Danish and Swedish are neighbouring languages, the phonological differences are great, decisive words and sentence constructions differ markedly from each other. In other words, it is an ambitious task. But it was not being in love that made me want to penetrate these differences. It was nothing tangible, only a sudden purposefulness. In December I thought my grasp of the language was good enough to meet Emil one-on-one.

[8] Trans.: Our relationship developed in sync with my comprehension of Danish. In March, I could listen to DR:s [Danish radio's] *Skønlitteratur på P1* [*Fiction/belles lettres on Programme 1*] and Emil asked if we were kærester [boyfriend and girlfriend, see footnote 1.]

[9] Trans.: She could have been named Synnøve, or Wenche or Ragnhild but Nora was a completely normal name. Norwegian and normal.

[10] Trans.: Swedish lunatic.

[11] Trans.: Of course I was too difficult [jobbig]. A word so horrible that it cannot even be translated into Danish.

ever-increasing obsession with Nora, Johanna tries a similar strategy to her romantic attachment to Emil: language learning. She studies Norwegian literature and even makes plans to establish a Scandinavian literary journal (104-105), but however hard she tries, she remains an inferior version of Nora: "[…V]i stod i samma position, men att hon alltid skulle göra det bättre. Att hon också bara var en skandinavisk kvinna med ett mjukt inre. Fast bättre" (151).[12]

In a sort of parodical version of the monolingual paradigm, Johanna equates the individual with language and nation – Johanna's, Emil's, and Nora's interpersonal relationships are directly mirrored on the national level and Johanna revels in popular Scandinavian stereotypes. (Indeed, one possible reading of the novel is as an allegory of inter-Scandinavian relations with the three main characters as personifications of stereotypical conceptions of the three countries). Emil is the relaxed Dane who speaks happily of "den transcendentala känslan av att befinna sig i tre skandinaviska språk samtidigt, den sublima upplevelsen av hur norskan och svenskan öppnar valv efter valv i själen" (69).[13] Johanna half-jokingly remarks that he seems to be longing for a tour of the Nordic countries (46), that she is adding another colour to Emil's Scandinavian flag banner of women and wonders if he aims to complete it with a Finnish pennant next.[14] Norway is conifer trees, mountain tops, oil funds (21) and most of all – Nora:

> Nora smälte ihop med sitt land, porträttet var tydligare än någon karta. Det var bilden av en annan geografisk möjlighet och allt vad det innebar. Ett annat liv. Snö. Ren, ren snö. Skidåkning. Ett sundare liv, rikare, mer fulländat. Fasta kroppar som gled i spåren och röda kinder. […] I Norge var allt som hemma fast bättre. Skogarna djupare, kronorna värda mer. (22)[15]

The dynamics among Scandinavian countries appear to exist in a set hierarchy. Just as the portrait of Nora points at Johanna, "Mot mitt fula ansikte"[16] (21), Sweden is an inferior version of Norway. Johanna both struggles with this division and hierarchy and seems to wish to reinforce it. In the following, I discuss the intricate entanglements of linguistic, national, medial, intimate and corporeal border dynamics in the novel.

3. Border Troubles

The physicality of language is highlighted at the very beginning of *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* with the heading of the first chapter: "Mitt språk i din mun" (Frid 2018, 7).[17] Language is situated corporeally; moreover, a figure of boundary-crossing is introduced as the narrator's language has entered someone else's bodily cavity. As language learning and falling in love are closely connected for Johanna, it becomes clear that the crossing of boundaries – linguistic,

[12] Trans.: […W]e stood in the same position but that she would always do it better. That she was also just a Scandinavian woman with a soft inside. But better.

[13] Trans.: [T]he transcendental feeling of finding oneself in three Scandinavian languages at once, the sublime experience of how Norwegian and Swedish open vault after vault in the soul.

[14] "Nu var det min tur att uppleva Odense i sommarskrud och lägga ytterligare en färg till Emils skandinaviska flaggspel. Jag undrade om han skulle komplettera med en finsk vimpel, men avstod från att fråga" (Frid 2018, 16). Trans.: Now it was my turn to experience Odense in its summer glory and add another color to Emil's Scandinavian flag game. I wondered if he would add a Finnish pennant, but refrained from asking.

[15] Trans.: Nora melted together with her country; the portrait was more legible than any map. It was the image of a different geographical possibility and all that it entailed. Another life. Snow. Pure, pure snow. Cross-country skiing. A healthier life, richer, more perfect. Firm bodies that glided along the tracks and red cheeks. […] In Norway everything was like at home, but better. The forests deeper, the crowns [money] worth more.

[16] Trans.: at my ugly face.

[17] Trans.: My language in your mouth.

corporeal, and emotional – are a prerequisite for love and intimacy. Simultaneously, however, Johanna struggles with the uncertainty of boundaries of a personal, linguistic, spatial and corporeal kind.

Johanna's confrontation with the (perceived) perfection of Nora represents a crossing of borders that threatens Johanna's very sense of selfhood: "Jag visste inte längre var gränsen mellan Nora och mig gick, denna dunkande längtan. Vad var det som fick gränserna att upplösas?" (159).[18] In stark contrast to Emil's vision of the relationship between Scandinavian countries and languages in terms of transcendental feelings or colourful flags, Johanna's view of the relationship between Scandinavian countries and languages and, by extension, Johanna, Emil and Nora, is depicted in military terms along with metaphors of battle and invasion. When she travels to Denmark, she remembers the march of warrior king Charles X Gustav (15) and when she questions Emil about Nora, she thinks of it as crossing the Great Belt (27), evoking memories of the 17th century wars between Denmark and Sweden. She has fantasies of bombing Norway (70) and when she contacts Nora, she describes this as entering Norwegian territory with cannons that shoot pig's blood (98). The military metaphors emphasise Johanna's violent experience of border instability:

> Det var svårt att säga om det var jag som ockuperade Norge eller Nora som ockuperade mig. Det enda som var uppenbart var att det var plågsamt, gränsöverskridande. Det kom både utifrån och inifrån och det gick inte att värja sig. (93)[19]

Since Nora and Norway are equated, it is not only Nora but also Norway that invades Johanna's life:

> Norge växte. Det spred sig utanför nationsgränsen och erövrade ett allt större område. Det åt upp mig i rött, blått och vitt. Hade jag haft möjlighet att bränna en flagga hade jag gjort det. Istället lånade jag en bok i nynorsk och anmälde mig till en orienterande kurs i norsk litteratur. If you can't beat them, join them? (92)[20]

Here, Norway is a conquering power, expanding beyond its borders and devouring Johanna in the colours of its flag. The boundary between Nora and Norway has long since dissolved and the boundary between Johanna and Nora is painfully unstable. But Nora and Norway are not the only painful and boundary-crossing things depicted in terms of expansion and conquest and as "eating" Johanna "in red, blue and white". Johanna's illness of endometriosis is depicted in an almost identical fashion:

> Det fanns ärrvävnad i rött, som visade på pågående inflammationer, och ärrvävnad och sammanväxningar i vitt och blått. Endometriosen växte. Den spred sig utanför livmoderns gränser och erövrade allt större områden. Den åt mig i rött, blått och vitt. (131-32)[21]

[18] Trans.: I no longer knew where the border between Nora and me went, this pounding longing. What was it that made the borders dissolve?

[19] Trans.: It was difficult to say if I was occupying Norway or if Nora was occupying me. The only thing obvious was that it was painful, boundary-crossing. It came from both outside and inside and it was impossibile to defend oneself.

[20] Trans.: Norway grew. It spread beyond the national border and conquered an increasingly larger area. It ate me in red, blue and white. If I had had the possibility to burn a flag I would have. Instead, I borrowed a book in Nynorsk and signed up for an introductory course in Norwegian literature. If you can't beat them, join them?

[21] Trans.: There was scar tissue in red that showed ongoing inflammations and scar tissue and adhesions in white

Endometriosis is a disease defined by border transgressions. Tissue similar to uterine tissue grows outside of the uterus, causing severe pain and possible infertility (World Health Organization 2025). The image on the cover of the novel's Swedish edition features a segment of the Norwegian romantic painter Johan Christian Dahl's famous landscape painting *View from Stalheim* (1842). Above the rounded peak of Jordalknuten at the centre is the golden imprint of the female reproductive organs. The cover connects Norway and endometriosis, an outer landscape and an intracorporeal one, just as they are connected for Johanna in the text. Placed beneath the stylised, abstract version of the reproductive systems, another reading of the rugged and forest-clad Norwegian mountains is suggested: as endometrioma-laden organs.

Nora is equated with Norway and, in turn, with endometriosis; corporeal suffering is mirrored by emotional and territorial transgressions. Indeed, I argue that the very abundance of border-crossings – the impossibility to contain oneself within certain boundaries and, instead, transgressing them and latching on to foreign territories, resulting in painful adhesions – can be read as the logic of endometriosis pushing beyond its corporeal territory and spreading to all other areas of Johanna's life – as well as dominating the thematic structure of the novel. Certainly, in her depiction of Johanna as plagued by an illness which centres on the uterus, Frid also invokes the complex cultural history of hysteria as an illness linked to the female reproductive organs (see Bernhardsson 2010, 120-21), just as she references the conception of women and the female body as being "too much": "kvinnokroppen som överdrivet kroppslig, ohämmad, gränslös och svämmande över sina bräddar" (167).[22]

In the continuous crossings of borders between inside and outside, body and geography, not only do military metaphors adhere to personal – emotional and bodily – spheres, but corporeal language also becomes attached to both emotional turmoil and geographies. Johanna's response to the pain that the constant – internal and external – border struggles cause her is sudden bursts into the scatological and sexual. In Johanna's narration, Norway brings on a drastic stylistic shift into dark, scatological humour and kamikaze bursts of bad taste. She compares Norway to a urinary infection,[23] and notes that "Oslo lät misstänkt likt arsle. Oschlo. *Hon bor ju i Arsle*, översatte jag" (Frid 2018, 14).[24] The perceived phonetic similarity between Oslo and "arse" inspires more crude outbursts: "Åk tillbaka till Arsle då. Åk dit och knulla henne i röven" (96-97; see also 108); "Mitt hjärta var fullt av skit. Av Norge" (22).[25] The scatological thread introduces yet another adhesion between inside and outside, corporeal and territorial, in the novel.

Johanna's crude outbursts are an unsuccessful defence mechanism with which she tries to manage the overwhelming feelings of insecurity from which she suffers and which she compares to the image of Nora's perfect Norwegian life. Because Nora and Norway are not "shit" – they are beautiful, superior and most of all, beloved. Notes on the back cover of the novel claim that

and blue. The endometriosis was growing. It spread beyond the borders of the uterus and conquered increasingly larger areas. It ate me in red, blue and white.

[22] Trans.: […T]he female body as excessively corporeal, unrestrained, boundless and overflowing. These aspects of the novel warrant further exploration that is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present article.

[23] "Emil sov och Oslo trängde sig på. Som en elak urinvägsinfektion. Och istället för att ta en penicillinkur och dricka mycket vatten fortsatte jag att torka mig från röven; bakifrån och framåt" (Frid 2018, 70). Trans.: Emil slept and Oslo thrust itself on me. Like a nasty urinary infection. And instead of taking a course of penicillin and drinking lots of water I continued to wipe my arse; from back to front.

[24] Trans.: Oslo sounded suspiciously like arse. Oschlo. *She lives in Arse*, I translated.

[25] Trans.: Go back to Arse then. Go back there and fuck her in the arse; My heart was full of shit. Of Norway.

it investigates "två av vår tids stora kvinnosjukdomar – Instagram och endometrios".[26] Johanna's jealousy is fed by the image of Nora's life that she sees glimpses of online. Social media plays a crucial part in facilitating Johanna's obsession and social media's border-shifting properties are an intrinsic part of the overall border dynamics in the novel.

Johanna's "light stalking" (31) of Nora brings on its own border transgressions:

> Att hitta rätt var att träda in i ett nytt rum. Världen fick en ny horisont. Att inta någons internet-tillvaro var en sällsam känsla, att gå in i ett rum som var både privat och offentligt. Man betraktar det med uppmaningen att titta men det är ändå ett intrång. (*Ibidem*)[27]

The space of social media transcends and destabilises the inner–outer and the private–public divide; it is no surprise that Johanna is as tempted as she is plagued by this. After opening the social media portal to Nora, Nora is a constant companion wherever Johanna goes: "Hon var med oss hela tiden" (38).[28] As Christian Refsum has shown, female protagonists being placed in a permanent state of longing through the ever-present possibility of contact that the smartphone enables, is an established motif in contemporary Scandinavian literature. The difference with Frid's novel is that here, longing is not directed toward a male romantic partner, but toward another woman. However, similarly to the approach in other novels, the space that the smartphone opens is affective and intimate (2020, 115-17).

The social media version of Nora becomes a distorting mirror in which Johanna views herself and according to which she fails in every way. Here, Nora is overwhelmingly loved by her mother, Guro, who posts pictures with captions such as "*Verdens vakreste menneske* eller *Nora, lyset mitt!*" (Frid 2018, 72; see also 92).[29] Johanna exclaims: "Hur kan man vara så älskad, hur *gör* man för att bli sådär älskad […]" (74; see also 91).[30] In contrast, Johanna's mother is absent from her life. She is not spoken of explicitly; instead, Johanna's lack of relationship to her emerges only indirectly, as when Johanna fantasises that Emil's father asks if she is an orphan and that Emil would reply: "Nej nej […], hun har bara ikke nogen, der elsker hende!" (120).[31] It can also be implied from Johanna's strong reaction to Guro liking one of her comments: "Noras mamma hade sett mig. Hon erkände min existens. Hon godkände mig på det mest fundamentala, grundläggande sätt man kan uppmärksamma en annan människa på. Like" (180).[32]

Johanna's obsession with Nora concerns more than romantic jealousy as it centres on the loving gaze from mother to daughter. One of Johanna's friends gives her a pin with Nora's face on it:

[26] Trans.: [T]wo of the great women's diseases of our time – Instagram and endometriosis. Mäkelä *et al.* (2025) mention endometriosis in connection to click-bait journalism and relatability.

[27] Trans.: Finding the right one was like entering a new space. The world was given a new horizon. To occupy someone's internet existence was a peculiar feeling, to walk into a space that that was both private and public. You view it with the invitation to look but it is still an intrusion. Note: The Swedish word "*rum*" can refer to both the more concrete "room" and the more abstract "space".

[28] Trans.: She was with us the entire time.

[29] Trans.: *The world's most beautiful person* or *Nora, light of my life!*. The text in italics is in Norwegian (and in italics) in the original.

[30] Trans.: How can you be that loved; what do you *do* to become so loved […].

[31] Trans.: No no […] she just hasn't got anyone who loves her!

[32] Trans.: Nora's mother had seen me. She acknowledged my existence. She approved of me in the most fundamental, basic way that you can acknowledge another human being. Like.

Den var internetkärleken förkroppsligad: den rymde allt som passerat mellan mammans ögon och Noras ansikte, komprimerat till en storlek som gjorde att den fick plats i handflatan. Det jag inte lyckats gripa tag i på egen hand hade materialiserats och tagit form utan min inblandning. (182)[33]

Through social media, the entanglements of romance, geography, language, and endometriosis are made yet more complex by the strand of the loving, motherly gaze. When Johanna states that the pain of Nora is the only pain that is proportionate to that in her uterus (154), this not only concerns the pain of being inferior to a love rival but also that of being unloved by one's mother. Yet another symbolic layer is added by the fact that endometriosis is a disease where cells resembling cells in the uterus, which in Swedish is called "*livmoder*", literally "life mother", cause pain by spreading to other organs – just like the loving gaze of a mother towards her daughter seeps into every part of Johanna's life, causing unbearable pain.

4. Multilingual Textual Praxis and Readerly Learning Journeys

As the analysis shows, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* deals thematically with questions of love, jealousy, pain, and Scandinavia, and the relationship between the Scandinavian countries and their languages is depicted as fraught with tension. Another layer of significance is added to the text through the friction between what the novel *says* about languages and what it *does* in its linguistic praxis. Indeed, this is an issue that it is always important to be aware of when interpreting literary multilingualism, as it can emphasise, illustrate or enact but also counteract a theme that is developed otherwise in the text (Tidigs 2014, 82).

Time and time again, Johanna speaks of how Scandinavians cannot understand each other, of the failures of communication and the lack of intercomprehension. Simultaneously, the novel is highly multilingual. Sprinkled throughout the text are Danish words and phrases, as well as some instances of Norwegian. Emil's lines of dialogue are rendered in Danish, and the Instagram posts by Nora's mother in Norwegian. Significantly, in addition to this, Danish and Norwegian penetrate the Swedish of the narrator. Johanna tells the reader of Nora's "vänkrets av kjekke norska jenter" (Frid 2018, 34),[34] concludes that "Nora var jag jo simpelthen ikke" (50)[35] and declares "Jeg er ikke redd, sa jag till mig själv med Jens Stoltenberg-röst" (105), [36] just to list a few of numerous examples.

Whereas the narrator-protagonist continually stresses borders and struggles with their collapse, the novel continuously transgresses the borders of Swedish when incorporating other Scandinavian languages mid-sentence. None of the features of Danish or Norwegian are translated into Swedish. Consequently, while repeatedly highlighting the borders and the lack of intercomprehension among Scandinavian languages, the novel simultaneously exposes its readers to Scandinavian languages, presupposing intercomprehension, an effort on the part of the reader to understand or, at least, tolerance of being put in a position of partial fluency.

As such, the novel's linguistic praxis can seem to undermine the image of the relationship between Scandinavian languages that the novel proclaims through its narrator. From another perspective, however, Frid's linguistic choices are highly in tune with the narrative arc of the novel,

[33] Trans.: It was internet love embodied: it contained all that had passed between the mother's eyes and Nora's face, compressed to a size that made it fit in the palm of my hand. What I hadn't been able to grasp on my own had materialised and taken shape without my involvement.

[34] Trans.: Nora's friend group consisting of kjekke [pretty] Norwegian jenter [girls].

[35] Trans.: I simply wasn't Nora. "Simpelthen ikke" is Danish for simply not.

[36] Trans.: I am not afraid, I said to myself in a Jens Stoltenberg voice.

as the untranslated multilingualism of the text enables readers to experience a similar journey of learning to that of the narrator-protagonist. Despite all her struggles, Johanna continues to make efforts with both Danish and Norwegian. Despite Johanna's declarations, the reader learns that she even publishes poems written in Danish (94-95). By composing literature in a non-native tongue, she crosses the border into a space that, within the monolingual paradigm, has been reserved for the first-language speaker (Yildiz 2012, 8-9).

By involving its readers in a learning process similar to that of the protagonist or at least in a process of increasing tolerance for semi-comprehension, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* is a prime example of the productive labour that literary multilingualism can invite readers to undertake. Most readers will know more Danish and Norwegian after reading the novel than they did before. By exposing readers to neighbouring languages, the novel not only invites them to learn (elements of) these languages but also, importantly, lets readers "experience" unfamiliarity and semi-comprehension, which brings on a deeper understanding of the novel. Thus, the effect is not only pedagogical but first and foremost literary.

Here, the notion of an ideal, fully linguistically competent reader needs to be abandoned if one is to gain a full picture of what the novel does – thematically and rhetorically. As Kleveland (2020, 93) points out, readers meet the text at different stages in their own language journey and are changed by reading. Consequently, no reading is the same, not even for the same reader. If one decides to re-read *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn*, one's interaction with the Danish and Norwegian features will be different than the last time.

Conclusion

Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn shows that it can often be that which resides closest to home that is most fraught with tension. This is the case with neighbouring Scandinavian languages, supposedly intercomprehensible yet highly emotionally charged in the novel. On the surface, the novel can seem to perpetuate popular stereotypes surrounding Scandinavian countries and their citizens; however, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated, these conceptions are put into intricate play in relation to other aspects of the novel.

As shown, the thematics of painful border troubles extends far beyond Scandinavian countries and languages: to social media, romantic and motherly love, and endometriosis. In fact, I have argued that an "endometriotic poetics" can be said to pervade the novel, where components – whether uterine cells, Nora, Johanna's emotions, or Scandinavian languages – are constantly found spreading across their supposedly "natural" borders into new territories, attaching themselves to new places, resulting in a blending of outer and inner, of private and public, of corporeal and emotional and of geographical and personal. Continuously, borders are shown to be processual events of "bordering" (see Sakai 2008) rather than static lines, where borders are torn down and re-established only to be transgressed once more as the protagonist-narrator simultaneously suffers from the instability of borders and longs for their collapse.

By choosing border dynamics as my entryway to the novel, I have emphasised literary multilingualism as both an integral and multifaceted aspect of the literary text. It is integral in the sense that it is deeply embedded in the meaning production of the text. Literary multilingualism is not a literary device employed simply for the "realistic" depiction of the languages of characters or milieus; it is a highly active component in the thematic structure of the text (see Tidigs 2014, 80-82). Moreover, multilingualism is multifaceted in the sense of not being internally coherent but, conversely, often highly ambivalent. As seen previously, there is a tension between thematic treatment and textual praxis regarding neighbouring

languages. However, this friction is artistically productive as it results in the novel not simply telling its readers of language learning and struggle but letting us experience it. In this way, *Nora eller Brinn Oslo brinn* reinforces literature's ability to not only inform or represent but also to *enact* and allow readers to *experience* such crucial questions as those of linguistic and corporeal borders.

The principal part of this article has centred upon pain and struggle. While this is certainly prominent in the novel, love and language learning are, as previously mentioned, also connected. When learning Danish, Johanna also experiences its sensual pleasures: "Vokalerna gled runt i munnen, nya och välsmakande" (Frid 2018, 94).[37] Reflecting upon the joys and hardships of language learning, Johanna, in a typical manner, connects the concrete and the abstract:

> Den hösten slog det mig inte att det skulle kunna finnas något romantiskt i att lära sig ett språk för en annan människas skull. Både romantiskt i en slags idealiserad bemärkelse, en fåfäng idé om att faktiskt kunna förstå någon annans värld, men också romantiskt på samma sätt som att ge bort blommor eller plocka ur diskmaskinen. Något mycket konkret, samtidigt symboliskt. (10)[38]

At the end of the novel, Johanna learns that Nora has closed her Instagram account, something that undeniably marks a border so that what is private is no longer publicly shared. Meanwhile, Johanna fantasises of completely merging with Nora so that no one would be able to tell them apart. The final line of the novel is deeply ambivalent: "Vid utfarten ur Stockholm pekade alla skyltar mot Oslo" (184).[39] This can be read as Johanna's problems remaining unresolved as the image of Nora/Norway continues to torment her. However, it can also be interpreted as Johanna leaving Stockholm – Swedishness being the symbol of inferiority, brokenness and the lack of love – and getting closer to Oslo: to that which is beautiful, beloved, and whole. Regardless, it is an apt ending that does not erase the complexity and ambivalence of Johanna's struggles, as she travels to Scandinavia, with love – although it is complicated.

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[37] Trans.: The vowels glided around in my mouth, new and delicious.

[38] Trans.: That autumn, it didn't occur to me that there could be something romantic in learning a language for the sake of another human being. Romantic both in some idealised sense, a futile idea of actually being able to understand someone else's world and in the same way as giving flowers or emptying the dish washer is romantic. Something very tangible, yet symbolic.

[39] Trans.: At the exit from Stockholm, all the signs pointed toward Oslo.

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Citation: Contributors (2026) "Quaderni di *Lea* – Scrittori e scritture d'Oriente e d'Occidente" 9: pp. 103-104. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/lea-1824-484x-17260.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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