

“Your Son is in The Babysitter”

An Examination of Some Semantic Issues Faced by Swedish Learners of English

Jennifer Brook

Abstract

Transfer errors by Swedish learners of English were examined with respect to their effect on semantic meaning. The historical and contemporary relationship between the Swedish and English languages makes many aspects of English, such as the use of the Latin alphabet and S-V-O syntactic structure, easier to acquire for native Swedish speakers; however, studies of Swedish learners of English have shown that use of the gerund in English as well as issues with modal verbs can cause semantic issues, which can impede the learner’s intended meaning. Additionally, “false friends” between Swedish and English such as *gift*, *glass*, and *blank*, can cause further interference and difficulties for the learner. Finally, teaching suggestions are also presented in order to assist Swedes learning English to avoid the negative interference of their first language in their second language use.

Introduction

As an official language of both the Kingdom of Sweden and the Republic of Finland, Swedish is the mother tongue of more than ten million people worldwide (Lewis, 2009). An Indo-European language, Swedish has been historically influenced by migration, foreign interests and conquests much like many of the world’s languages, continuing, to a certain extent, even after it was formalized in 1906 (Haugen, 1982, p. 201). In fact, the Swedish language shares many common historical linguistic influences with English as both languages were shaped by Old Norse, Latin and other Germanic languages. Since the middle of the twentieth century, this trend has shifted as English now directly influences Swedish vocabulary, idioms, and expressions through literature, media and a variety of other forms. However, despite the numerous similarities and frequent interaction between Swedish and English, there are also many differences between the two languages; sometimes it is the subtle differences that may cause difficulties for Swedish learners of English as a second language. These difficulties result in semantic misinterpretations which cause confusion and frustration for both Swedish learners of English and their intended audience. In order to understand this difficulty better, this paper will first investigate the close historical connection between Swed-

ish and English before addressing recurrent issues related to the use of the gerund and modal verbs, along with errors caused by “false friends,” that can cause great difficulties to native Swedish speakers who are attempting to learn English. Additionally, this paper will offer teaching strategies that an ESL educator may employ to assist his or her Swedish L1 students.

The Historical Background of the Swedish and English Languages

As previously mentioned, Swedish has historically been influenced by several other languages. It was weaned from its Old Norse, runic orthography when Christian missionaries arrived in Scandinavia at the end of the Viking Age (AD 750-1050) using the Latin alphabet. At that time, Latin loan words such as *kondoleans* or *condolence* (from the Latin *doleō*, to *grieve*) were incorporated into the Swedish language (Haugen, 2009). Swedish was then further influenced by both German and Dutch immigrants and merchants with the rise of the Hanseatic League during the early 14th century. In turn, English was heavily influenced by Old Norse, the ancestral language of modern Swedish, during the Viking conquests. Additionally, like Swedish, English was influenced by Latin and other Germanic languages throughout its history. As a result the two languages are closely related as both



Brook, J. (2010). “Your son is in the babysitter”: An examination of some semantic issues faced by Swedish learners of English. *Hawaii Pacific University TESOL Working Paper Series 8* (1, 2), 25-32.

Publication’s website: <http://www.hpu.edu/index.cfm?contentID=8064&siteID=1>

are considered Germanic, even though Swedish belongs to the Northern-East branch, while English is in the West branch (Pyles & Algeo, 1993). In fact, some linguists and educators believe that because Swedish and English are so closely related in many respects, including their common syntax and phonology, English should be “relatively easy for Scandinavians to learn” (Davidsen-Nielsen & Harder, 2002, p. 21).

In addition to the many linguistic commonalities, the ease of learning English as a foreign language in Sweden has been further expedited by the fact that, since World War II, English has been the most widely taught language in *mellanstadium* (middle schools) and *gymnasium* (high schools). Swedes have also witnessed an explosion in the amount of their exposure to English through popular culture and business in the past thirty years, marking the first consistent interaction between the two languages since the Viking age (Haugen, 1982, p. 203). As such, most Swedes have picked up basic English vocabulary and phrases even without formal English instruction. For example, Swedish and English share many cognates, such as *potatis*, *tiger*, and *choklad*, due to their common history and etymology. Other similarities of note include the fact that both Swedish and English are SVO (subject-verb-object order) languages, both use only nominative and genitive cases, and prepositioned attributive adjectives. Additionally, a Swedish learner does not have to learn a new orthography as both languages utilize the Latin alphabet. In sum, English and Swedish are more closely related than many of the other Indo-European languages.

Semantic Issues Faced by Swedish Learners of English

Gerunds

A specific area that may cause confusion for Swedish learners of English is learning to use the gerund. A gerund, which has been defined as a verbal that ends in *-ing* form and functions as a noun, does not occur in the Swedish language (Davidsen-Nielsen & Harder, 2001). Since Swedes are not familiar with the gerund, they tend to use an infinitive form in its place in all cases, even if it causes the meaning of the sentence to be altered. According to Bol-

inger (1968), the use of the infinitive form in the place of gerunds can cause semantic issues because while gerunds describe “events that are ‘vivid, real and fulfilled,’” infinitives “tend to depict events that are “hypothetical, future and unfulfilled” (as cited in Celce-Muricia & Larsen-Freeman, p. 648). Consider this example from Davidsen-Nielsen and Harder (2001):

- (1) *I must really stop to smoke.
Jag måste verkligen sluta att röka.
 (I really must stop smoking.)¹
 (p. 31)

In this example, one may believe that the surface meaning with the use of the infinitive is that the speaker wants to stop to smoke, or in other words, he or she will stop doing an activity (e.g., working, driving) in order to have a cigarette, an action that is not yet fulfilled, in Bolinger’s sense. However, if one understands that the speaker in this case is a native Swedish speaker who is not familiar with gerunds, one will notice that they have used the infinitive form, which is acceptable in Swedish for the gerundic meaning. The student really meant to refer to *smoking* as a fulfilled action: *I really must stop smoking.*

This example could also illustrate Corder’s (1971) notion of a covert error, which is characterized as an error in language that seems correct on the structural level yet does not reflect the learner’s intended meaning. Covert errors are evident in several instances of utterances produced by Swedish learners of English (p. 59). For example, consider the following example of a covert error gleaned from Linnarud’s (1986) study of Swedish learners of English, which may occur due to the transfer of infinitives where a gerund is necessary:

- (2) *I did forget to buy the fruits.
Jag glömde att handla frukt.
 (I forgot buying the fruit.)
 (p. 101)

In this case, the Swedish learner of English has used an infinitive form, which has not made the sentence itself ungrammatical. However, within the context of the student’s story, the semantic intention of the sentence has been lost because the student was not aware of the meaning of the gerund. While

the produced sentence means that the speaker did not buy the fruit (the infinitive indicates an unfulfilled action), the intended meaning of the sentence was in fact that the speaker recalled going to the store but did not recall buying the fruit (the use of a gerund, *I forgot buying the fruit*, would indicate that “buying” is a fulfilled action).

With this information in mind, there are several ways that one may approach teaching Swedish learners of English how to correctly use the gerund, while also differentiating it from the present progressive and infinitive form. According to Folse (2009), most English language learners will learn the present progressive first and thus may falsely assume that they already know what a gerund is when it is introduced (p. 208). Additionally, as noted above, infinitive forms are present in the Swedish language; therefore, students usually will be most comfortable in using this form in comparison to the gerund. In order to assist students with learning gerunds and to avoid making errors, which are not only ungrammatical, but also result in semantic misunderstanding, as seen in examples (1), (2), and (3), several activities can be created.

In order to craft activities that are tailored and meaningful to students, one can implement pre-tests and more interactive drills. For the pre-test, the teacher may introduce various sentences that require either a gerund or an infinitive and then ask them to choose the correct form. As Folse suggested, most students will get some incorrect, which will signal that they do not know all of the material (p. 209). This can be important as a step in drawing the learners’ attention to what they need to know. Some additional activities that may be developed in order to exemplify the use of the gerund, rather than memorization, may include cloze and creative construction activities. In the cloze exercise, the teacher can select a clip from a popular English language film such as *Harry Potter*, and then type up the dialog leaving blanks where gerunds are present in the character’s speech. The students can then be asked to view the film to fill in the blanks utilizing the correct use of the gerund. This activity is useful in not only helping students conceptualize how the gerund is used

in conversation, but it also attracts students’ interest by using authentic material.

A more advanced task can involve using a game. The teacher can take a soft, inflatable beach ball and tape different verbs all over it. For this activity, students are asked to form a circle in the middle of the classroom. As the ball is tossed to each student, they must read aloud the verb that is closest to their left thumb as they catch it. The student is to then create a sentence utilizing the correct form of the verb, whether it is a gerund or an infinitive or if it is a verb that can take on both forms. The student then tosses the ball on to another student who will then briefly explain, or paraphrase, the meaning of the previous student’s sentence(s). This activity is more difficult as it requires higher order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis; however, it is less boring than repetitive drilling exercises, while also allowing the students to utilize self-made examples.

Modal Verbs

Another common error that Swedish learners of English may also have some difficulty with occurs when they attempt to learn the meaning of English modal verbs. Although the Swedish language makes use of various modal verbs that have an approximate equivalent in English, there are several that do not directly and clearly translate, leading to difficulties. For example, consider the Swedish verb *skulle*, which roughly translates to the auxiliary verb *should* in English; even though this seems straightforward enough, it is important to note that in certain situations, *skulle* can also translate to several other English (auxiliary) verbs such as *would*, *could*, *ought* or even *might*. Since only a single Swedish word is used to convey these verbs, Swedes will often use the generic translation, leading to ambiguous sentence construction. Consider the following covert error:

- (3) *She said that she should
Hon sade att hon skulle
walk out with the dog.
gå ut med hunden.
(She said that she would take
the dog for a walk.)
(my observation)

Obviously, the use of *should* in this case is not ungrammatical; however *should*, conveys an obligation, such as, *she really should walk the dog because it needs exercise. Would*, on the other hand, is used in lieu of *will* to express a future action in a past sentence. For example, *Yesterday she said that she would take the dog for a walk if no one else was home.*

Also, consider the following covert error that illustrates how *should* may accidentally be substituted for *might*:

- (4) *She looks like she should be sick.
Hon ser ut som om hon skulle kunna vara sjuk.
 (She looks like she might be sick.)
 (my observation)

In this case, the use of *should* is awkward, but may convey that the subject *ought* to be sick. Therefore, it may be better if used in a sentence that utilizes a non-referential *it*, such as *It looks like she should be sick (throw up) in order to feel better*, indicating a recommendation.² Another possibility may be that the speaker is trying to convey that the subject *should* have already been sick as in, *She should have been sick by now since her partner had pneumonia last week*, which indicates an expectation; however, the intended meaning is that it looks like the subject *might* be sick, as in, *She looks like she might be sick so she should go home early* or *She looks like she might be sick from eating that hamburger*. In Swedish, the verb that would be used in this sentence to convey the meaning intended in this example is *mår*, which means “to feel.” In order to convey the intended meaning, a Swede would normally say *Hon ser ut som om hon mår illa* [she looks like she feels sick].

The error of modal verb transfer also occurs when Swedish learners of English utilize the verb *kan*, which very roughly translates to the auxiliary verb *may* or *might*. As one may have guessed, the Swedish *kan* is often confused with the English auxiliary verb *can*, meaning having ability, which leads to additional unintentional errors and confusion. In addition, according to Davidsen-Nielson and Harder, *kan*, unlike *can* is used in “affirmative sentences to talk about whether things are the case, or may happen in the future” (2001, p. 32). For example consider this covert error:

- (5) *Anna can be in Toronto now.
Anna kan vara i Toronto nu.
 (Anna may be in Toronto now.)
 (my observation)

In this capacity, *can* refers to Anna’s *ability* or power to be in Toronto now, while the use of *may* implies that there’s a *possibility* or it may be the case that that Anna is in Toronto now.

The reason for the learners’ difficulties with the modal verbs in the examples shown is threefold: they may occur because a similar word does not exist in Swedish, because some modals convey several different meanings, or because the words are “false friends,” that is, they appear to be the same word but have very different meanings. To help students learn English modals, an activity that may be used at the high intermediate or advanced level involves creating sentences that contain modals that Swedish learners of English frequently have the most issues with, including *can*, *might*, *should* and *would*. The teacher can then construct two sentences that correspond with each word’s intended meaning; for example, (sentence 1) *Saskia might be late*, (sentence 2) *The bus broke down*. The teacher may even want to construct corresponding sentences that relate to his or her student’s names and interests. Sentences 1 and 2 can be printed and cut out separately and then randomly passed out to the students. The objective of this activity is for students to talk to each other in order to pair up with the other student who has the corresponding piece of the correct sentence and meaning. Sorting through all of the available possibilities in order to create a connection between the sentences requires the students to analyze the meaning of the different modals. In addition, this activity also reinforces the meaning conveyed by the different modals by putting them into a context that students may better relate to.

False Cognates Between Swedish and English

Even though this discussion about the confusion surrounding the meaning of *kan* versus *can* was limited to the fact that they are modal verbs, it should also be mentioned that the two words are cognates. As previously discussed, Swedish has been heavily influenced

by other Germanic languages, and has many common roots with English. With this considered, it should not come as a surprise that Swedish and English share many cognates, or words with a common historical origin, such as *foot*, *son*, *grass*, and *house* for example, which may facilitate target language learning; however, there are also some cognates that can be used in different ways, as exemplified in the *kan/can* example above. False friends, which are words that are identical or very similar in orthography, yet have a different meaning in Swedish as compared to English are also numerous. In fact, English speakers are so amused by the false friends between English and Swedish that a *Chicago Sun-Times* article (2004), entitled, ‘*Fartful’ workbench, ‘Jerker’ desk: Is IKEA hiding a grin?*,³ explored the humor behind the transferred errors on some of Ikea’s most popular products. In addition, dozens of “Swenglish” websites and blogs, such as the Swedish Blog at the website “Transparent Language,” point out the humor of Swedish-English intra-sentential code switching. In order to further illustrate how false friends, may become a problem for Swedish learners of English, consider the partial list of false friends between Swedish and English below by observing the varying definitions in each language. Please note that the definitions for the words given have been simplified in order to facilitate a general understanding of the terms.

Many of the examples noted above may result in miscommunication, confusion, and in some instances, embarrassment as Swedish learners of English negotiate the nuances of the English lexicon. This is especially evident in many Swedes’ interlanguage, even when the learner has mastered other, more complex grammatical aspects of English. For example, an embarrassing situation may occur if a student said either of the following:

- (6) *He took fart and hopped/jumped.
Han tog fart och hoppade.
 (He sped up and jumped.)
 (my observation)
- (7) What is the fart limit in Hawai`i?
Vad är fart-gräsen i Hawai`i?
 (What is the speed limit in Hawai`i?)
 (my observation)

Although these examples might be considered extreme, one may be surprised at the dozens of humor websites on the internet such as Avigsidan.com and books such as *In and Out of English*, which are dedicated to the humorous use of false friends in the interlanguage between Swedish and English. In addition, a conversation with several native Swedish speakers, including former HPU valedictorians Thomas Mellin and Claes Insulander, revealed that these and similar phrases occur often and not intentionally in the English of beginner level Swedish learners (personal communication, August 4th, 2010).

In addition, according to Kiparsky (1970), the inclusion of false friends in different lexical categories can cause some additional confusion as “the words of one class may be prone to develop derived meanings which their synonyms, in another class do not get” (p. 278). Consider the following example:

- (8) She cold.
Hon fryser.
 (She’s cold.)
 (my observation)

According to Kiparsky’s theory, even though *she’s cold* and *hon fryser* essentially means the same thing, there is the difference in that *frysa* is a verb and thus, it is open to semantic meaning extension that is not available to the adjective *freezing*. Also, consider the following example (Kiparsky, 1970):

- (9) *She had to be cold outside while
Hon fick frysa därute medan
 they were looking for the key.
dom letade efter nyckeln
 (She was getting cold outside while they
 were looking for the key)
 (p. 280)

In these examples, *frysa* is able to fit into several contexts that require actions rather than states.

One of the reasons that there are so many false friends as well as cognates between Swedish and English is due to the impact that English has made on Swedish language development. This relationship between Swedish and English has been especially prevalent since World War II, with some scholars calling English a threat to the Swedish language and culture (Haugen, 1982, p. 202). This has

not only contributed to the normalization of some historically connected words (cognates), but also the wholesale adoption of English words into the Swedish lexicon. In fact, many contemporary English words have been incorporated into Swedish including, *baby*, *best-seller*, *check*, *deodorant*, *jeans*, *reporter* and *service* among hundreds of others (Holmes & Hinchliffe, 2008, p. 2). Although some English words have been adopted and remain cognates, many other adopted English words have evolved to take different meanings or connotations, which can cause confusion when Swedish learners of English then attempt to transfer them back to English. For example, *babysitter*, which is a common English word denoting a person who watches a child while his or her parents are away, has been adopted into Swedish to mean a specific type of baby or high chair, which can lead to sentences such as:

- (10) *Your son is in the babysitter.
Din son sitter i babysitter
 (Your son is in the high chair)
 (my observation)

This sentence would most likely be misunderstood by an English-speaking listener, who, if the parent of the child, would most likely be alarmed! Adding further confusion, the term for the popular game of *basketball* has been shortened to *basket* in all contexts, not only in reference to the way in which a player may gain a point in the game (Stålhammar, 2007).

The challenge with teaching false friends is that most ESL classrooms have diverse groups of students whose native languages differ greatly, making teaching students how to recognize and avoid errors due to false friends a potentially daunting task. However, in the homogeneous EFL classrooms, teachers may choose to address the challenge of teaching false friends by introducing a new false friend, and its correct definition and meaning, at the beginning of each class period. Another activity is to construct a story that uses several false friends between the native and target language. The teacher can ask the students to take turns reading the story aloud and then stop after each sentence to have stu-

dents paraphrase the meaning and to help identify where the intended meaning in the target language may have been impeded. These materials are not widely available in print form; however, they are becoming more common on ESL/EFL teacher message boards and personal web pages on the internet. Please note an excerpt from a story to teach false friends to Swedish learners of English below (Grudzina, 2008, adapted from *The Blanket* by Floyd Dell). The false friends are underlined.

Together, the old man and his grandson washed the dishes. When the dishes were done, the old man poured the boy a glass of milk and they sat by the fireplace. "I'll get my harmonica and play for you," the old man said. "I'll play some of the old tunes." But instead of the harmonica, he brought out a large, wool blanket. "Now, isn't this a fine blanket?" said the old man, smoothing the fabric over his knees. "And isn't your father a kind man to be giving the old man a blanket like this to go away with? And it will be so warm on the cold winter nights to come." The boy nodded with a blank expression on his face. "When you become an old man like me you will hope to have a blanket as fine as this." (p. 46)

In the short excerpt above, one may note that the words underlined are considered to be false friends between Swedish and English as gleaned from Table 1. For example, the English word *blanket* closely resembles Swedish *blankett* but actually means "form" in Swedish and English *become* closely resembles the Swedish word *bekommer* but actually means "bother" in Swedish. A teacher may choose to underline the false friends in the short excerpt chosen, as seen in the example shown here, in order to draw their students' attention to words that may cause semantic misunderstandings and to facilitate a discussion on their intended meaning in English.

Table 1
A List of Common False Friends Between Swedish and English

| Word in Swedish/ English | Swedish Meaning | English Meaning | Lexical Category |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--|------------------|
| <i>Gift</i> | Poison | Present; something given without payment in return | Noun |
| <i>Blank</i> | Shiny | Having no marks; not filled in | Noun |
| <i>Bra</i> | Good | A woman's undergarment | Noun |
| <i>Fabrik</i> | Factory | A cloth | Noun |
| <i>Fart</i> | Speed | To pass wind; Flatulence | Verb |
| <i>Glass</i> | Ice-cream | Handleless container for drinking; a hard, non-crystalline, transparent substance produced by fusion normally used for windows and bottles | Noun |
| <i>Plant</i> | Level, to lay flat | To put or set in the ground for growth such as seeds, young trees, flowers etc. | Verb |
| <i>Blankett</i> | Form | A large, rectangular piece of soft fabric, often with bound edges, used especially for warmth as a bed covering | Noun |
| <i>Bekommer</i> | To bother | To come into being | Verb |
| <i>Slut</i> | End/finish | An immoral woman; a prostitute | Noun |

Note. The English definitions were gleaned from Dictionary.com (2010).

Conclusion

Linked both historically, and through modern influences, Swedish and English share numerous commonalities, including the use of the Latin alphabet, S-V-O syntactic structure and cognates that may help facilitate language acquisition. However, even though the two languages are closely related, there are distinctions that may inhibit a learner from fully mastering the target language and may additionally result in semantic misinterpretation.

Through the analysis of some of the common differences between Swedish and English including the absence of the gerund and confusion when utilizing modal verbs and false friends, one will be able to identify how semantic interpretations may become an issue for Swedes as they learn to master the English language. It is the hope that while keeping this information in mind, educators can develop strategies and activities such as those suggested in this paper.

Notes

¹Intended meaning is provided in parentheses following each learner's example. The Swedish examples in this paper come from various Swedish regional varieties from Östergötland, Örebro and Stockholm.

²This utterance, while slightly awkward, is used in some regional dialects of English, such as with some Canadian English speakers.

³*Fartful* in Swedish roughly translates to "Ugly Speed" or jokingly in "Swenglish" as "Ugly Fart." *Jerker* is a Swedish given name.

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