Swedish in Finland: Pushed Back in the Cyberspace?

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This article provides an insight into the dynamics of language use among Swedish-speaking Finns regarding two specific aspects of internet use: browsing and blogging. The data was collected from persons with Swedish as their registered mother tongue in 2009. The results indicate a preference for using either Finnish or English when browsing and a preference for Swedish when blogging. Examining the background of these results, we found that people's linguistic environment played an important role in shaping their language competence and language identity, which, in turn, guided their language choice when using the internet. While browsing in Swedish and Finnish was directly affected by language competence, language identity and the composition of linguistic environment, blogging in Swedish and Finnish was only directly affected by language identity.

Keywords: Swedish-speaking Finns, bilingualism, English, browsing, blogging

The potential opportunities and dangers for small languages that follow from the development of communication technologies have attracted much attention (Crystal, 2001; Moring, 2008; Warschauer, 2000). Will such technologies benefit the languages by offering access to low cost and easily distributed niche publishing? Or will the predominance of English and the primary language of the state only grow? Lately, empirical research has been presented that shows the leading attraction to English as an internet language. For example, Gandal (2006) found that French speakers in Quebec demonstrate a preference for English as their internet language. He explained this with the "first mover advantage" of English, that is, the early establishment of a large variety of internet content in the language. Similarly, Durham (2007)

demonstrated the role of English as the *lingua franca* in email communication among French-speaking, German-speaking and Italian-speaking Swiss university students, which greatly surpassed the use of their native languages. At the same time, the research also points to possibilities for small languages to not only benefit from but also proliferate the global and local ("glocal", to quote a popular portmanteau concept) potential of digital media production and its geographically unlimited and low cost distribution (e.g., Crystal, 2001; Moriarty and Pietikäinen, 2011).

The present study adds to the accumulation of empirical evidence by introducing data from a case study carried out among Swedish speakers in Finland. From the media point of view, in addition to the globally dominant new media supply in English, the Swedish minority in Finland has extensive access to both traditional and new media in Finnish and Swedish, produced both in Finland and Sweden (Moring, 2007; Moring and Husband, 2007). From the language perspective, Swedish in Finland can be characterized by an extended level of bilingualism: the Swedish language group is composed of individuals who live in unilingual Swedish and bilingual (Swedish and Finnish) households and in municipalities representing a continuum from predominantly Swedish to predominantly Finnish speakers (Finnäs, 2010).

We adapt a language ecology approach to describe and analyze the context of internet use among Swedish-speaking Finns. Language ecology is defined here as the study of 'interactions between any given language and its environment' (Haugen, 1972: 325). Although more recent use of this metaphor has led to different extensions of language studies, such as examining the relationship between the biological environment and language (e.g. Fill, 1993) or the ecological relations between linguistic signs (e.g. Enninger and Wandt, 1984), our aim is to refresh Haugen's original idea and apply it exclusively for the understanding of linguistic behaviour in a bilingual setting.

Importantly, Haugen draws a distinction between two aspects of the linguistic environment: "intimacy" and "status".[1] Intimacy is associated with contacts established through common family and group life−what is called here the "subjective linguistic environment"−whereas status is associated with power and influence in a social context−what is called here the "objective linguistic environment" (Haugen, 1972: 329). The approach suggests that both the subjective linguistic environment and

objective linguistic environment contribute to forming our relationships to languages, competence in the languages, and our language behaviour (*c.f.* Fill and Mühlhäusler, 2006; Mühlhäusler, 2002).

Based on the division of levels offered by the framework of language ecology, we propose a model (see Figure 1) that specifies how the subjective and objective linguistic environments affect the language competence and language identity of Swedish-speaking Finns and how these relate to language choice when using the internet. In particular, we expect that the presence of the majority language, Finnish, in the family and in the municipality will increase competence in Finnish and identification with Finnish, which, in turn, will increase the use of Finnish in the internet. We examine two specific aspects of internet use: browsing and blogging. Browsing implies passive language use through reading and listening while participating in blogging implies also writing, which is an active form of language use. This difference is expected to have consequences for activities on the internet, as the threshold for *producing* in a language is higher than the level of *consuming* in a language.

Figure 1. The proposed model.
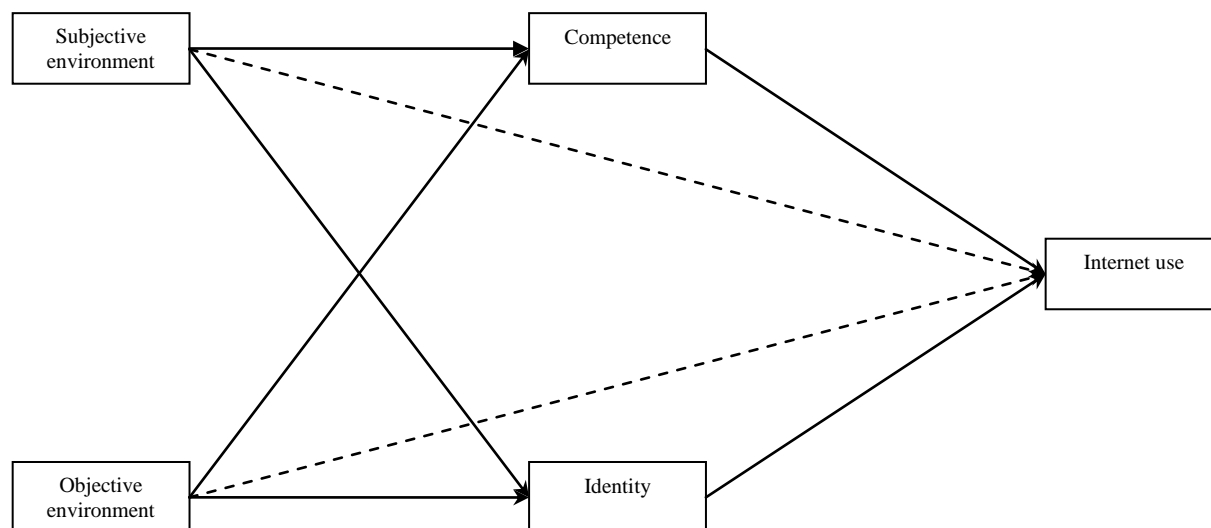
1. Swedish in Finland

Although the Swedish population in Finland is small and, in a numeric sense, a minority (see below), Swedish is not a minority language in a formal sense. Finland was part of Sweden until the early nineteenth century when it became a Grand Duchy

linked to Russia. Until the later part of the nineteenth century, Swedish was the dominant language in official contexts. When Finland became independent in 1917, Swedish remained as one of the two national languages on par with Finnish.

Thus, today's Finland is a bilingual country with two national languages: Finnish and Swedish. The statuses of the languages are ensured by the Language Act (423/2003)[2], which established that Finnish or Swedish can be used in municipalities where speakers of the language make up 8% of the local population or constitute at least 3,000 persons. The official status of Swedish is accompanied by a broad institutional network of both formal and informal levels comprising, *inter alia*, different educational and media institutions, political parties and a Swedish Lutheran diocese.

Despite being a national language, the Swedish language faces challenges in Finland, which are, for the most part, due to the small size of the Swedish language group. The Swedish-speaking population has decreased in both absolute and relative terms from the time Finland became independent in 1917 (Tandefelt and Finnäs, 2007). From comprising 14% of the population in 1917, today about 5.4% of Finland's population or 284,000 persons are registered with Swedish as their mother tongue.

Regionally, the Swedish-speaking population is concentrated along the southern and western coastline of Finland. Most of the Swedish speakers live in Uusimaa/Nyland on the southern coastline, which also hosts the capital city. Proportionally, the share of Swedish speakers in this region is low−only somewhat more than 7%. However, outside the capital area, along the coastline of Uusimaa/Nyland, there are municipalities with a higher concentration of Swedish speakers (Finnäs, 2010). The second largest concentration of Swedish speakers is in Ostrobothnia on the western coastline. In this region, the Swedish concentration is proportionally much higher than in Uusimaa/Nyland (Finnäs, 2010).

The Swedish population is becoming increasingly bilingual. Our survey shows that a clear majority (80-90%) understand Finnish well enough to follow Finnish media. The audience surveys that are routinely carried out by the Finnish Broadcasting Company show similar figures. Bilingualism among Swedish speakers in Finland has also been increased through the formation of family relations (Finnäs, 2010; data based on official statistics from Statistics Finland from 2009). Today, more

marriages involving a Swedish-speaking partner are formed over the language border than within the Swedish language group. According to marriage statistics, 40% of Swedish-speaking men and 30% of Swedish-speaking women form their marriage with a Finnish-speaking partner. There is, however, clear local variation: in Ostrobothnia and in those municipalities in southern Finland where the relative proportion of Swedish speakers is bigger, marriages within the language group are more common. In the capital area, where Finnish is the dominant language, marrying a partner from the Finnish language group is clearly predominant (Finnäs, 2010).

The use of Swedish in Finland is, however, facilitated by a relatively rich media landscape. As a whole, the media landscape developed much in the same way as it did in Sweden and Norway. Its characteristics are a strong regional press and primarily state-owned public radio and television services that have maintained a strong position irrespective of deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s.

Regardless of the size of the population, there is a richness of domestically produced Swedish media in Finland. In 2012 this included eight daily newspapers, two radio stations, and a television network. In addition, the Swedish population on the western coastline has had free access to television from Sweden through overspill from analogue broadcasts. In these areas, access has been secured after digitalization of the terrestrial broadcasting network at a low cost by using relay broadcasting stations (Moring and Husband, 2007).

2. Method

2.1 *Data*

A survey was carried out in 2009 by TNS-Gallup Finland through pre-recruited and demographically representative panels, who responded over the internet. The data was collected among persons with Swedish ($N = 703$) as their registered mother tongue.

2.2 *Measures*

2.2.1 *Internet use*

The linguistic patterns of internet use were measured by two variables: browsing language and blogging language (121 persons or 18% of the respondents reported participating in blog activities). Both variables had three categories: "mostly in Finnish", "mostly in Swedish", and "mostly in English". It should be noted that these categories are not exclusive–that is–they do not refer to monolingual language use but

rather activities that are *predominantly* in one language, while not excluding the use of other languages. Furthermore, our data did not comprise content-specific information about the internet use (i.e. about the content of the most frequently visited webpages and blogs).

2.2.2 *Subjective linguistic environment*

The subjective linguistic environment was measured by a dichotomous variable. Seventy one per cent of the participants had no spouse or a Swedish-speaking spouse (these families were nominally regarded as Swedish-speaking), whereas 29% of the respondents had a Finnish-speaking spouse (these families were nominally regarded as bilingual).

2.2.3 *Objective linguistic environment*

Regarding the objective linguistic environment, we considered the linguistic composition of the municipality. Accordingly, 15.5% of the respondents lived in a municipality where the share of Swedish speakers was over 67%, 33.4% of the respondents lived in municipalities where the proportion of Swedish speakers ranged between 33% and 67%, and 51.1% lived in municipalities where Swedish speakers made up less than 33% of the local population.

2.2.4 *Language identity*

A five grade scale was used to gauge language identification ranging from 1 for "fully Finnish speaker" to 5 for "fully Swedish speaker". A high mean value indicated that the respondents identify strongly with Swedish ($M = 4.35$, $SD = .87$). An analysis of variance revealed the significant effects of the subjective linguistic environment$-F(1,696) = 26.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$–and objective linguistic environment$-F(2,696) = 10.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$– for language identity. However, these effects were not qualified by an interaction between the two factors ($p = .51$).

2.2.5 *Language competence*

Another five grade scale was used the measure language competence ranging from "much better in Finnish" to "much better in Swedish". The mean value indicated that the respondents generally have a good competence in Finnish, but their Swedish is

better ($M = 3.85$, $SD = .95$). An analysis of variance demonstrated that both subjective linguistic environment–$F(1, 697) = 22.99$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$– and objective linguistic environment– $F(2, 697) = 18.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$– had significant effects on language competence, but their interaction was not significant ($p = .83$).

2.2.6 *Social background*

The average age of participants was 49 years ($SD = 15$); approximately 48% of the sample was female and 52% was male. Twenty nine per cent of the participants had a higher education degree.

2.3 *Analysis*

At the outset, we provided a description of browsing language and blogging language that demonstrated the relative use of Swedish, Finnish, and English. Then parallel multiple mediation analyses were performed using the PROCESS SPSS macro (Hayes, 2012). In quantitative research, mediation is a process by which an independent variable affects a dependent variable indirectly through an intervening or mediator variable (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). As our focus was on the local languages, Swedish and Finnish, at this stage of our study we excluded those participants who reported using English. Consequently, our dependent variables were used as though there were only two categories: Swedish and Finnish. The subjective linguistic environment was entered as an independent variable and language identity and language competence were proposed as mediators. Both the mediator and the dependent variable models were controlled for gender, level of education, age and the objective linguistic environment. Mediation was tested with 5,000 bootstrap estimates of the indirect path coefficient. As Preacher and Hayes (2008) recommend, indirect effects were significant when the bias corrected and accelerated confidence interval did not include zero.

3. Results

The results for browsing in a language and blogging in a language are presented below (Figure 2). As can be seen, both browsing and blogging can be characterized by a diverse language use of Swedish, Finnish, and English. However, there are clear differences in the power division between the languages in the two activities.

Specifically, regarding the role of the mother tongue, the use of Swedish is greater when it comes to blogging, which reflects a more active language use, than in browsing, which implies a more passive language use. The use of the majority language is remarkable: one third of the respondents browse and one fifth of the respondents participate in blogging activities mainly in Finnish, irrespective of Swedish speakers having access not only to internet content in Swedish from Finland, but to most of the content that is produced in Sweden as well. It is also noteworthy that English, as a third competitive language, played a considerable role in both types of internet use.

Figure 2. Browsing language ($N = 703$) and blogging language ($N = 121$) among Swedish-speaking Finns (%).
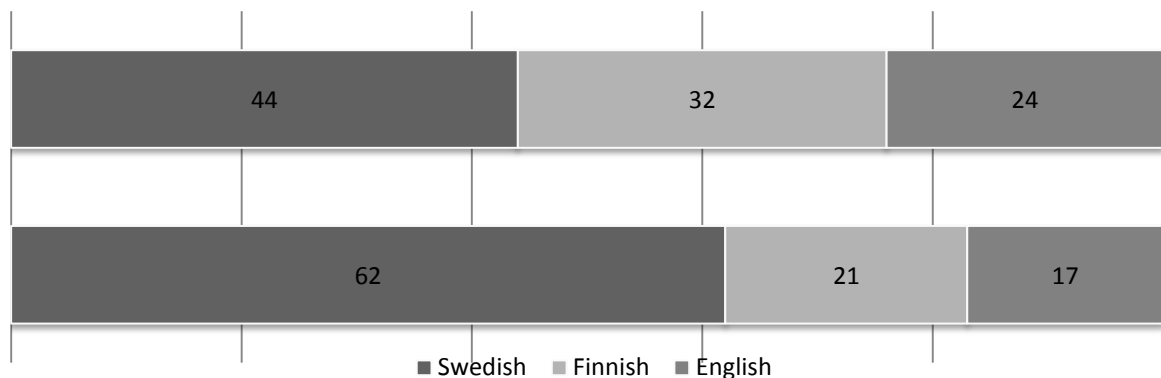
We tested our model with parallel multiple mediator analyses. With respect to browsing language, the model was significant ($B = .99$, $CI_{.95} = .70$, 1.39) and, according to Nagelkerke, pseudo R^2 explained about 46% of the variance in the dependent variable ($\chi^2 = 205.47$, $n = 487$, $p < .01$). The total effect of subjective linguistic environment ($B_{total\ effect} = 1.64$, $p < .01$) decreased significantly ($B_{direct\ effect} = 1.06$, $p < .01$) as language competence ($B = .63$; $CI_{.95} = .38$, .97) and language identity ($B = .37$; $CI_{.95} = .14$, .65) were included as mediators; this indicated a partial mediation. In addition, the objective linguistic environment affected not only competence ($B = -.34$; $p < .01$) and identity ($B = -.24$; $p < .01$), but also browsing language ($B = .37$ $p < .05$). All social background variables (age, sex, level of education) were not significant.

The model was also significant regarding blogging language ($B = 1.83$, $CI_{.95} = .88$, 3.40) and, according to Nagelkerke, pseudo R^2 explained about 56% of the

variance in the dependent variable ($\chi^2 = 58.23$, $n = 121$, $p < .01$). The total effect of the subjective linguistic environment ($B_{total\ effect} = 2.25$, $p < .01$) became non-significant ($B_{direct\ effect} = 1.16$, $p > .05$) as language competence and language identity were included in the model; this demonstrated a full mediation. The individual indirect paths indicated that language identity ($B = 1.32$; $CI_{.95} = .43, 2.89$) was a significant mediator between family and blogging language, but language competence was not ($B = .52$; $CI_{.95} = -.34, 1.52$). Although the linguistic composition of the family affected both the competence and identity of Swedish-speaking Finns, language use in blog activities was influenced only by identity and not by competence. The objective linguistic environment did not affect the language identity of Swedish-speaking blog users ($B = -.02$ $p > .05$), but it had a significant impact on their language competence ($B = -.21$ $p < .05$) and even a direct impact on blogging language ($B = .96$ $p < .05$). The different social background variables were not significant.

4. Discussion

This study has provided an insight into the linguistic patterns of internet use among Swedish-speaking Finns who live in different subjective (composition of family) and objective (composition of municipality) linguistic environments. Concerning the contention between Swedish and Finnish, we found that Swedish speakers living in bilingual families have better competence in Finnish and identify more highly with Finnish than those who live in monolingual Swedish families. Similarly, the greater the proportion of Finnish speakers in the municipality, the more contact Swedish speakers have with Finnish, which enhances their competence in and identification with the Finnish language. In consistency with other studies (e.g. Henning-Lindblom and Liebkind, 2007; Landry and Allard, 1994), this finding demonstrated that both the subjective and the objective linguistic environment play a significant role in forming language competence and language identity, which clearly supports the assumptions of language ecology (Haugen, 1972). Language competence and language identity were studied as mediators, contributing to the choice of language in internet use.

With respect to browsing, we found that both competence and identity mediated the effect of the subjective linguistic environment on internet use. We further learned that both the subjective and the objective linguistic environment affected browsing in a language not only through language competence and language identity, but also directly. Thus, we have to assume that there are other variables not

yet detected that are based in the linguistic environment and influence language behaviour when browsing on the web.

With respect to blogging, our results indicate that identity mediated the effect of the subjective linguistic environment on language use in blog activities, whereas competence did not. This finding appears to be contradictory in regard to assumptions about the character of passive and active internet use, as it poses the question: why is competence not a significant factor in the more complex process of expressing oneself actively, through writing? This finding is especially important as it stands out as significant despite the relatively small number of blog users ($N = 121$) in the representative sample. A likely explanation would be that this phenomenon can be explained by the nature of blogging as a form of self-expression: when it comes to blog participation it can be presumed that identity, including language identity, works as an important motivational factor for self-expression while language competence is just a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. To put it simply, people do not participate in blog discussions because they have a competence in the given language but because they want to express themselves. This explanation would be in line with our results that show a full mediation. The subjective linguistic environment influenced blogging language only indirectly, via language identity, whereas the objective linguistic environment influenced language competence of blog users. More to the point, the results reveal that the municipality also has a direct effect on blogging language. In other words, we have to consider factors other than identity and competence that are based in the municipality and affect language use in blog activities.

We also found that the preference to use Swedish as internet language among Swedish speakers in Finland is challenged not only by the majority language, Finnish, but also by English. The use of English as an internet language was relatively high regarding both passive and active forms of internet use. However, whilst almost one of four respondents displayed a preference for English as for their internet language when browsing, only one of six preferred English when blogging. These results lend support to earlier findings (Durham, 2007; Gandal, 2006) that English has received the position of preferred internet language due to its early and strong establishment as a language of internet content. On the other hand, our results included the qualification that in contexts where many languages balance, such as among Swedish speakers in Finland, the position of English is balanced against these other languages.

We found a clear preference for active use of Swedish, particularly when using the language actively, such as when writing blogs.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study, including a cross-sectional design and problems with measurement (i.e. using single items when measuring competence and identity), we regard our findings notable. In addition, the scope of the present study opens several paths for further research. Researchers should identify variables other than competence and identity that mediate the effect of the linguistic environment on language behaviour. For example, it can be assumed that adapting to majority language culture (typical to the capital area in southern Finland) can lead to changes in tastes and preferences, which can indirectly affect language choice. We may also speculate on other factors, such as the different composition of the overall media landscapes, and the effects of further socio-economic variables, such as rural/urban milieus and internet use at work. Furthermore, closer/more remote cultural ties with the kin-state Sweden, due mainly to regional differences within Finland, may explain some of the variance. Finally, in the light of the rapid development of particularly mobile applications, other types of new media use should also be integrated into the model in the future.

Notes

1. Unlike diglossia (Ferguson, 1959), which implies that the use of the minority and the majority languages is differentiated by function (i.e. the different spheres can be characterized by the exclusive use of either language), in the Haugen approach the two languages are in organic and dynamic contact with each other, which includes their simultaneous and concurrent presence in the different spheres.
2. The Language Act (423/2003) entered into force in 2004, repealing an earlier Language Act of 1922. According to its general provisions, the national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish. The purpose of this Act is to ensure the constitutional right of every person to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before courts and other authorities. The goal is to ensure the right of everyone to a fair trial and good administration irrespective of language and to secure the linguistic rights of an individual person without him or her needing specifically to refer to these rights. Section 5 defines the basic unit of the linguistic division of the country as the municipality. A municipality is either *unilingual* or *bilingual*. The government determines every ten years by a government decree, on the basis of the official statistics, which municipalities are bilingual and what is the language of the majority in these municipalities, as well as which municipalities are unilingual Finnish or Swedish-speaking municipalities. A municipality is designated as bilingual if the population includes both Finnish- and Swedish-speakers and the minority comprises at least 8% of the population or at least 3,000 persons. A bilingual municipality is designated unilingual if the minority comprises less than 3,000 persons and its proportion has decreased below 6%. On the recommendation of the municipal council, the government may determine by a government decree that the municipality is bilingual for the following ten year period even if the municipality would otherwise be unilingual (See http://www.finlex.fi/pdf/saadkaan/E0030423.pdf).

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