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THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN THE NORDIC LANGUAGE SYSTEM

Johan Strang[1]

Introduction

There was something reassuring about how naturally the joint press conference on April 13, 2022, between the Finnish Prime Minister, Sanna Marin, and Swedish Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson, was conducted in English. Traditionally, Finnish political leaders have made much effort to communicate in Swedish with their Scandinavian colleagues in official settings. This has been a symbolic validation of the bilingual status of Finland, as well as a confirmation of its status as a Nordic country. The latter was particularly important during the Cold War period because it was by being Nordic that Finland aspired for a position on the western side of the Iron Curtain, despite having to deal with heavy Soviet pressure and ending up on the losing side of World War II (Koikkalainen 2010; Majander 2004). In 2022, however, there were no eyebrows raised against having an official press conference in English – in fact, more attention was given to Prime Minister Marin's leather jacket, which thrilled and confused the Swedish press (*Aftonbladet* April 13, 2022; *Expressen* April 13, 2022; *Dagens industri* April 13, 2022).

To be sure, the subject of the press conference – Finnish and Swedish NATO membership – was of great international interest, and the intention was undoubtedly to send clear signals across the Atlantic Ocean to North America by using English. But the choice of language also undeniably reflected how English is taking over from the three Scandinavian languages, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, in intra-Nordic communication. Usually, resorting to English is taken as a sign of a deteriorating Nordic communality, and Sanna Marin herself belongs to the group of (younger) Finnish politicians who are less comfortable

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with Swedish than their predecessors. On this occasion, the logic was different, or even the complete opposite. With a perceived rising security threat following the Russian aggression on Ukraine, the existential bond between the Nordic nations Finland and Sweden was stronger than ever before, perhaps with the exception of the Finnish Winter War 1939–1940. The choice of English during the press conference signaled efficiency, professionalism, and urgency. It was hardly insignificant that Finland, having trodden further along the path toward NATO, appeared to be in the driver's seat, while it was Sweden's turn to react to decisions and developments on the other side of the Gulf of Bothnia. Indeed, it seemed as if Finland had finally earned the respect of its so-called "bigger brother" and took part in the conversation on equal grounds.

In this chapter, I reflect upon the growing role of English as a language of communication between officials and citizens of the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, as well as the three autonomous regions – the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland. As the example of Prime Ministers Marin and Andersson indicates, this is far from an uncomplicated issue. On the one hand, Nordic cooperation and the Nordic community remains closely associated with the Scandinavian language community. For some, it is the mutual comprehensibility of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish that makes the Nordic region a cultural entity with its own distinctive traditions, and from such a perspective, English threatens the very bonds that tie the Nordic nations and their peoples together. On the other hand – and this is the main provocation of this chapter – English can also have a liberating and democratizing role in leveling cultural and political hierarchies within the Nordic region itself.

The argument is simple: the Scandinavian language community is the prerogative of those who speak one of the three Scandinavian languages – Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish, but the Nordic region also comprises 5 million Finnish-speaking Finns, 350,000 people for whom Icelandic is a first language, as well as up to 100,000 speakers of the indigenous Greenlandic or Saamic languages. In addition, there is a growing number of migrants from outside the region whose first language is something other than a Scandinavian language.[2] 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 (Heller 1995; Rojo 2016). The Scandinavian language community is culturally important and deserves political support, but in this chapter, I emphasize the democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive function provided by English as the new lingua franca in the Nordic region.

The chapter begins with an overview of the status of the Scandinavian language community before moving on to a discussion of the cultural and linguistic hierarchies of the region, which can be referred to as the Nordic language system (de Swaan 2001). This opens up for an analysis of the growing

role of English in trans-Nordic communication: is English a help or a hindrance for Nordic cooperation and for sustaining the Nordic community in general?

Is the Nordic language community in decline?

Following centuries of religious, national, and welfare state homogenization (see Chapter 1), the national majority languages of the Nordic countries have had a very strong position, but the history and politics of language differs across the region. Linguists usually divide the spoken Nordic languages into three main groups: 1) North Germanic/Scandinavian; 2) Finno-Ugric; and 3) Eskimo-Aleut (sign languages of the Nordic countries constitute a fourth group). The first group includes Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, as well as Faroese and Icelandic. Faroese and Icelandic are insular and conserved versions of West Scandinavian, no longer entirely comprehensible for Scandinavian language speakers on the mainland. The second group comprises the Finnish and Sámi languages, including the Finnic languages Kven and Meänkieli. Greenlandic, in turn, is classified as an Eskimo-Aleut language, related to the Inuit languages in Canada. In addition to these languages, there is a large number of minority languages, some of which have a long history in the region (e.g., Yiddish, Romani, German), and others which have arrived with more recent immigration (e.g., Greek, Turkish, Serbo-Croatian, Kurdish, Arabic, Somali, Polish, Chinese, Thai). Up until the 1970s, policies directed at both indigenous peoples and immigrants aimed at "civilizing" them in order to incorporate them as equal citizens. Learning the dominant majority language was an important part of this (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012).

There are hundreds of languages spoken in the region, but it is the mutual comprehensibility of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish that forms the basis of a shared regional identity. The idea of a "Nordic," not merely "Scandinavian," language community builds on the historical presence of Danish in Greenland, Faroe Islands, and Iceland, and of Swedish in Finland. This is a story with imperial and even colonial connotations, and a constellation that continues to be infused with more or less subtle manifestations of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991; see also Heller 1995; Rojo 2016).

The received view has for a long time been that the overall Scandinavian language community is in decline, and more often than not, the rise of English is singled out as one of the main culprits. Some scholars assert that there is a fair amount of nostalgia at play here. Every generation is concerned with its youth, and although older people usually understand the other Scandinavian languages better than young people do, scholars tend to suggest that this is because they have more experience with them than young people have. That is, there is an assumption that older generations were not so good at understanding Scandinavian when they themselves were young (Delsing and Åkesseon 2005,

115). The state of the Scandinavian language community is a complicated issue to study because of the many regional, social, and age-related variations that must be accounted for. Complementary studies have not been conducted over time, so there is no way of conclusively confirming or denying the deterioration narrative.

The most credible studies of the state of the Scandinavian language community are Øivind Maurud's (1976) *Nabospråksforståelse i Skandinavia* (Understanding of neighbor languages) and Lars-Olof Delsing and Katarina Lundin's Åkesson's (2005) *Håller språket ihop Norden?* (Does language keep the Nordic region together?), which both set out to investigate the population's actual knowledge of the Scandinavian languages. In addition, the Nordic Council of Ministers have conducted several smaller studies, usually based on interviews or larger surveys on (mainly young) people's self-reported understanding and knowledge of the Scandinavian languages (e.g., Brink 2016; Frøshaug and Stende 2021). While the studies are all different in nature, there are some general conclusions that can be drawn from them.

First, the studies suggest that Norwegians understand the Scandinavian languages better than other speakers of Scandinavian languages do. Norwegians find it particularly easy to read Danish and to understand spoken Swedish. One explanation for this is that written Norwegian is very similar to written Danish, whereas spoken Norwegian often sounds more like Swedish than Danish (Delsing and Åkesson 2005, 74–75, 136; Frøshaug and Stende 2021, 4; Torp 2004, 70–72). Norway has also been part of both Denmark and Sweden, a history which arguably has manifested itself in a post-imperial habit of following news and debates in those countries. Another major reason why Norwegians find Danish and Swedish comparatively easy lies in their greater historical and political tolerance for dialects, a point taken up later in this chapter.

Secondly, the studies show that Danes understand Norwegian, especially written Norwegian, well, but have a harder time with Swedish. Correspondingly, Swedes understand particularly spoken Norwegian well but find spoken Danish quite difficult (Delsing and Åkesson 2005, 77–78). Outside of these three Scandinavian countries, it is the Faroese who understand the different Scandinavian languages the best – in fact, almost as well as the Norwegians do (Frøshaug and Stende 2021, 4). The Icelanders and Greenlanders, by contrast, have a much harder time understanding the Scandinavian languages. The Swedish-speaking Finns (including the Ålanders) understand Norwegian and Danish at the same level as the Swedes, while their Finnish-speaking compatriots have even more difficulty understanding Scandinavian languages than the Icelanders and Greenlanders do. Finnish is not only a very different language than the Scandinavian ones, but also a larger and, as such, more self-sustainable language than Greenlandic or even Icelandic (Frøshaug and Stende 2021, 14).

Another interesting observation in the studies is that many Scandinavian language speakers report that their first confrontation with a spoken foreign Scandinavian language is something of a shock (Brink 2016, 142). The preconception that one should be able to understand the other Scandinavian languages is often based on the similarity of the written languages. However, the preconception might also have grown out of political indoctrination conducted by official Nordic cooperation (the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers) as well as by civil society actors such as the Nordic associations, who often see the Scandinavian language community as the basis of Nordic communality. When talking to each other, Scandinavians sometimes "Scandinavize" their language, substituting single words or using phrases from the other languages. However, there is no established common Scandinavian-based lingua franca: when Nordic people say they communicate in "Scandinavian," the communication normally takes place in two or three different languages. To overcome difficulties, they tend to talk slower, explain things more elaborately, and use livelier body language (Uhlmann 2002).

Research also provides at least some support to the view that Nordic citizens understood each other better in the past; that is, there is some support for the notion that the Scandinavian language community is deteriorating (Delsing and Åkesson 2005, 115–135). Interestingly enough, the studies suggest that Norwegians understand other Scandinavian languages at a similar level as they did 20 or 50 years ago, whereas the Danes and the Swedes both have become less proficient in the other Scandinavian languages. Popular opinion holds that the Danish language is, if not deteriorating, then at least becoming more difficult to understand. This claim is commonly supported by the observation that a Danish radio or TV broadcast from the 1950s is more comprehensible for a Swede than a contemporary broadcast and by studies indicating that even Danish children have a harder time learning to read and write than their Scandinavian peers (Bleses et al. 2008).

The reasons for declining mutual comprehensibility among the Scandinavian language community are probably manifold. The studies point at mega-trends such as globalization and technological development (satellite television, internet, social media), or to economic and political transformations such as EU membership (Delsing and Åkesson 2005, 143–147). However, as the Norwegians' knowledge in Danish and Swedish is at a similar level as before, there seem to be other social and political factors involved. To put it bluntly: whereas the Norwegians seem to hold continued interest in Denmark and Sweden, the Danes and Swedes seem to have lost some of their interest in their Nordic neighbors and particularly in each other. At times, the countries have even served as each other's counter images in heated debates, especially when it comes to immigration policy (Jalving 2011; Sundström 2009).

To be sure, the studies also point at the increasing dominance of English as one of the main reasons for the declining Scandinavian language community. Nordic people today know English better than they did 50 or even 20 years ago, while their understanding of Scandinavian languages has declined (Delsing and Åkesson 2005, 105). A recent study indicates that 95 percent of young people think English is easy, and a staggering 65 percent think that it is sometimes easier to express oneself in English than in their first language (Frøshaug and Stende 2021, 5). In intra-Nordic communication, the Norwegians stand out as those who most often stick to Scandinavian, Danes and Swedes use English as often as they use Scandinavian, whereas Finns and Icelanders tend to opt for English exclusively (Frøshaug and Stende 2021, 5). The studies also emphasize that the languages are used for different purposes: English is preferred as a professional language because it is perceived as efficient and reducing the risk for misunderstandings, while in more informal meetings such as coffee breaks or at dinners, Nordic people often switch over to Scandinavian because it is more intimate and personal. On such occasions, English might be experienced as a bit formal and distanced (Brink 2016, 103–131).

Hierarchies among the Scandinavian languages

From the outside, the Nordic region is often presumed to be a harmonious group of countries with few, if any, internal grudges. There have not been any intra-Nordic military conflicts since the Napoleonic Wars, and the five nations have learned to trust and consider each other as close allies. The four large Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden – are rather equal in population. There is no one nation that dominates the community in a similar way as, for example, England does in the United Kingdom. However, this does not mean that there are no internal hierarchies, or that the Scandinavian or indeed Nordic languages are equal to each other. On the contrary, there are some languages considered more central and others more peripheral in the region, and the languages compete with and accommodate each other in ways that should be analyzed from a political, economic, and sociological perspective (de Swaan 2001).

On a very basic level, the region consists of the old states Denmark and Sweden, which have a long history as semi-large empires, and the new nations Finland, Iceland, and Norway, all of which have a history as parts of Denmark and/or Sweden but gradually gained sovereignty in the 19th and 20th centuries. Arguably, this means that the people in the new nations have a historically conditioned post-imperial habit of following the debates and developments in the old states, whereas the Danes and Swedes tend to be less interested in their smaller and more peripheral neighbors. Indeed, it is not often discussed how contingent the Scandinavian language

community was first on the position of Copenhagen as a literary and cultural semi-center during the so-called "Scandinavian moment in world literature," and on the economic and political leadership of Sweden during the heyday of the social democratic welfare state in the 1970s. In the late 19th century, the most important Scandinavian publishing houses were located in Copenhagen, and it was through cultural mediators such as Georg Brandes and Harald Høffding that intellectuals from the more peripheral Nordic countries gained access to the intellectual centers on the European continent (Fulsås and Rem 2017; Nygård and Strang 2016). Reading and understanding Danish was necessary for aspiring intellectuals across the Nordic region.

Later, Sweden took over this intra-Nordic leadership position. Sweden emerged as an exceptionally successful and wealthy country after the Great Depression and World War II. In due course, the Swedish welfare state achieved a unique international position as a political beacon that pushed the frontiers of modernity in the eyes of progressives worldwide and certainly in the neighboring Nordic countries (Andersson and Hilson 2009; Childs 1936; Marklund 2013). Applying the words of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1979), Swedish society became a "horizon of expectation" in political debates across the region. It was to Sweden that intellectuals, policy experts, and politicians in the other Nordic countries looked for models to implement at home. Perhaps particularly in Finland, the rhetoric of "Nordicness" became a way of framing the Swedish people's home (*folkhemmet*) as the future of Finnish society as well (Kettunen 2001; Strang, Marjanen, and Hilson 2021).

The extent to which this Swedish political and economic leadership spilled over to the cultural sphere and further on to language relations is difficult to prove with any certainty. During the era of public service monopolies, Swedish radio and television were an important complement to Danish, Norwegian, and Finnish national TV in the border regions, much more so than the other way around (*Grannlands-TV i kabelnät* 1997, 45–49; Lindgren 2009; *Nordisk tv på tværs af grænser* 2019). Arguably, there was a similar asymmetry at play regarding other cultural expressions. Literature, children's literature, pop music, and various magazines were more often exported from Sweden to the neighbors than the other way around, meaning that the Scandinavian neighbors were exposed to Swedish culture and language more than the Swedes were exposed to Danish or Norwegian culture or language. Elsewhere, I have speculatively argued that Swedish culture, whether it was ABBA, Ingmar Bergman, or Astrid Lindgren, or politicians like Olof Palme, was permeated by the universal ambition of speaking to humankind, whereas Danish, Finnish, and Norwegian cultural expressions were more provincial and national in their outlook (Nygård and Strang 2017, 70–75; Strang 2018).

The fact that the Swedish leadership position has crumbled since the end of the Cold War has probably had a negative effect on the Scandinavian language

community. With the internationalization (or Americanization) of both the economy and the cultural sphere, it is no longer as much to Sweden that the Nordic neighbors look as a model. In fact, the role of Sweden has in some ways become almost the reverse. Sweden continues to represent the future for its Nordic neighbors, but it is in some ways a future that they seek to avoid. Polarized debates on immigration, neoliberalism, and Covid 19-measures, for example, have mutated the role of Sweden from a utopia that the Nordics hated to love, to a dystopia they love to hate (Strang 2021a). There are also other reasons for the decline of Swedish leadership in the region. Economic and social factors are crucial. Whereas Sweden pulled many immigrants from Finland in particular during the 1960s and '70s, it is today quite common that young Swedes go to Copenhagen or Norway for work. Linguistically, this means that the neighbors no longer feel obliged to adapt to a Swedish hegemony, but that adaptation takes place more equally than before. The increased proficiency in English and the rising position of English as a primary language in various fields of culture, business, and academia are undoubtedly also contributing factors. On a political level, much effort has been put into leveling the hierarchies between the Nordic languages. In 1987, the Nordic governments agreed on a language convention stating that official authorities in the region should be able to provide service in Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish (Agazzi 2017). The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages raised political awareness around language problematics and contributed to the recognition of Finnish, Romani, Yiddish, and Meänkieli as official minority languages in Sweden (Landqvist and Spetz 2020).

Norway occupies a special position in the Nordic language system. As a vast and scarcely populated country, Norway is blessed with many different dialects that have more social and public functions than dialects in the other Nordic countries (Akselberg 2002; see also Chapter 9). This is plausibly one of the reasons why Norwegians tend to have few problems in understanding Danish and Swedish, which may appear as merely other variations of Norwegian. However, this also contributes to the asymmetric relationship with Denmark and Sweden, where the Norwegians understand and follow culture and debates in these countries much more than the Danes and Swedes follow Norwegian culture and debate.

Norway is in many ways a bastion of linguistic tolerance, but also of language struggle. In terms of written language, Norwegian was basically identical to Danish up until the 19th century, when some authors started experimenting by incorporating some local Norwegian words and syntax in their writing. It was also as part of the 19th century romantic nationalist movement that *nynorsk* "new Norwegian" was born, causing a language feud that carried into the 20th century. New Norwegian was created by the botanist and self-taught linguist Ivar Aasen (1813–1896), who gathered rural dialects mainly from the remote

fjord landscapes in western Norway. Initially, it was called *landsmål* (country/rural language), as opposed to *riksmål* (state language), which remained closer to Danish (Bull 2002). With independence in 1905, Norway became a bilingual country consisting of numerous spoken dialects, and two written norms, which in a 1929 reform were renamed as *nynorsk* (new Norwegian) and *bokmål* (book language). Today, some 10 to 15 percent of Norwegians use new Norwegian, and its official status means that it is taught as a compulsory subject in schools, and that official institutions are required to communicate in both written norms. Particularly significant is the mobilizing role that new Norwegian has had for the preservation and visibility of dialects in the Norwegian public sphere. Dialects were accepted at theaters, as well as on national radio and television at an earlier stage in Norway than in the other Nordic countries, where the strife toward centralization and standardization was stronger.

Hierarchies among the languages of the Nordic countries as a whole

The linguistic hierarchies of the region become even more apparent when one looks outside of the three principally Scandinavian-speaking countries. Greenland and the Faroe Islands remain parts of the Danish Realm (*Rigsfælleskabet*), which means that while the Greenlandic (*Inatsisartut*) and Faroese (*Løgting*) parliaments have extensive authority over local affairs such as public services, police, town planning, welfare services, culture, and so on, certain issues such as monetary policies, citizenship, and foreign and security policy remain under Danish control. Historically, Danish was the main administrative language on both the Faroe Islands and Greenland. On the Faroe Islands, activity in schools and churches was conducted completely in Danish as late as the 1930s, and it was only in connection with the new Home Rule Act of 1948 that Faroese became the main official language. It took until 1975 before the high schools (*gymnasier*) switched from Danish to Faroese. Today, Danish remains as the official second language on the Faroe Islands, which is taught in schools at an early age – as, of course, is English.

In Greenland, the presence of Danish as an educational, administrative, and political language is strongly permeated by colonial problems. While the Danish colonizers originally were eager to learn the language of the native Greenlanders in order to spread Christian civilization, and therefore initially supported the evolution of the indigenous languages in education and culture, political administration remained wholly in Danish. After 1953, when the status of Greenland was changed from a colony to a county (*amt*), Danish became increasingly dominant as a language of education, public administration, hospitals, and industry (Brincker 2022). The Home Rule Act of 1979 as well as the Self Rule Act of 2009 strengthened the position of Greenlandic, but all

children are still taught Danish in school, and Danish remains strong among the political and administrative elites, some of whom do not even know Greenlandic. It has been suggested that everyone in an official position should at least commit to learning Greenlandic, but the issue is politically controversial (Gad 2009).

Greenland remains a postcolonial society where the elite population is more Danish than the subaltern, and the subaltern more Greenlandic than the elite. Danish represents a path to progress, but as the language of the former colonizer, it is also very difficult to combine with a Greenlandic (national) identity. English plays a crucial role in these debates on Greenlandic post-coloniality and independence. There is a movement toward increasing the role of English, for example, by replacing Danish with English as the first foreign language in schools, but precisely as on the Faroe Islands, some claim that Danish remains important as it enables the youth to seek free higher education in Denmark or other Nordic countries. At the same time, some scholars and commentators have argued that abandoning Danish in favor of the more "neutral" English could serve as a way of embracing modernity and providing global opportunities without excluding the Danish speakers in the same way as a monolingual Greenland would (Gad 2009). As such, 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. In a society where the colonial tension is manifested in a language other than English, the new global lingua franca could play an emancipating role.

It is sometimes argued that in gradually phasing out Danish, the Faroe Islands and Greenland follow the path of Iceland, who earned sovereignty (in a personal union with Denmark) in 1918 and full independence in 1944. Crucially, however, the Icelandic language had a rather established position long before the political independence of Iceland. The Bible was translated into Icelandic already in the 16th century, in connection with the Lutheran Reformation. Instruction in schools was always in Icelandic, even if much of the reading materials were in Danish. That said, the position of Danish has undoubtedly been very strong in Iceland. In the 19th century, it was seen as an important goal to strengthen the proficiency in Danish among the Icelandic youth in order for them to get access to higher education at the University of Copenhagen. By way of paradox, the very same process also strengthened Icelandic nationalism, which gave rise to antipathies toward the position of Danish as an elite language in Iceland (Karlsson 2009). The same ambivalence continued to mark Icelanders' attitudes toward Danish also in the 20th century: political resentment was on an individual level often combined with an urge to learn Danish in order to get access to education, knowledge, culture, and entertainment. Today, Iceland is the only country in the world where Danish is taught as a foreign language in schools and the teaching receives support from Denmark. From an Icelandic point of view, the idea is arguably no longer to provide Icelanders with access

to Danish higher education – there are many domestic opportunities, and many Icelanders study in the USA or UK. Instead, teaching in Danish serves to signal the "Nordicness" of Iceland and to provide Icelanders with a key to the rest of the Scandinavian languages. The position of Danish is seldom a topic of controversy in Icelandic debates. However, in 1999, the government decided that English would replace Danish as the first foreign language taught in schools, and as such, it could perhaps be argued that the English language serves to loosen the ties to Denmark. At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that the Icelandic relationship to English has imperial connotations of its own, following the British pre-emptive occupation in 1940, and the American military presence during the Cold War. Today the dominating language debate in Iceland concerns the future of the Icelandic language itself, and in this discussion, it is definitively English rather than Danish that comprises the main threat.

The position of Swedish in Finland bears some resemblance to that of Danish in Iceland, with the important difference that Finland has had (and continues to have) a Swedish-speaking minority that has never exclusively been connected to political and administrative elites. Like Icelandic, the Finnish language has a long history and is by far the largest non-Scandinavian language in the Nordic region. Mikael Agricola, who translated the New Testament into Finnish in 1548, is generally considered the father of the written Finnish language. However, as Finland was part of the Swedish Empire until 1809, it was only during the period of romantic nationalism in the 19th century, when Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire, that Finnish developed into a political and cultural language able to support a nation (Hyvärinen et. al. 2003). For a long time, Swedish continued to have a privileged position as the main language of politics, culture, and economy in Finland, and the degree to which the Finnish language would strengthen in comparison to Swedish became a key issue for the national movement. Whereas only a diminishing faction of Finnish elites longed for a reunification with Sweden, the main struggle concerned whether Finland should be completely Fennicized, or whether it was possible to be a Finnish national(ist) in two different languages (Engman 2016). The language feud continued after the independence in 1917 and was often connected to debates regarding the geopolitical orientation of Finland. The so-called "nordists" (not least within the social democratic labor movement) supported a Scandinavian orientation, while others denied the value of Sweden and Scandinavia as a bridge to Europe. According to these groups, Finnish sovereignty and nationalism could be developed on its own, under German protection, or in cooperation with other border states to Russia (Meinander 2016). Approaching World War II and especially during the Cold War, Nordic orientation became a lifeline to the West, which meant that the Swedish language had a special geopolitical significance (Majander 2004). Even if the Swedish minority in Finland continued to decrease in proportion

(from 12.9 percent in 1900 to 7.4 percent in 1960), Swedish remained an official language, and Swedish skills were required for many official positions. The school reform of 1968 made Swedish a compulsory subject in Finnish elementary schools, which it has remained until today. Today, Finland is officially a bilingual country with approximately 5 percent of the population registered as Swedish speakers, mainly on the southern and western coastlines, as well as on the Åland Islands, which have an autonomous status not unlike that of Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

For some Finns, particularly within the national conservative and populist True Finns Party and the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity (*Suomalaisuuden liitto*), the status of Swedish in Finnish society has remained a source of irritation. Arguing that Finnishness and the Finnish language are inseparable from each other, they have attacked what they see as the unreasonable linguistic privileges of Swedish speakers in Finland. Some radicals have even used a de-colonial rhetoric of emancipation from the legacy of Swedish dominance and subjugation. Others have merely pointed to the futility of Swedish skills in an increasingly English-speaking world or argued that the instruction in Swedish compromises the teaching of other foreign languages such as German, French, Spanish, or Russian (Sundell 2015). As a result of these debates, the second domestic language was exempted from the high school exams in 2003, and in 2018 the government launched a "language trial" (*kielikokeilu*) whereby municipalities were allowed to introduce the possibility for pupils to replace Swedish with another foreign language besides English. Very few pupils turned out to be interested in participating in the trial, perhaps because Swedish remains a requirement for academic degrees and for many public positions (*YLE* May 5, 2018). There has also been a discussion in some larger cities on whether English should receive an official position comparable to that of Swedish in order to accommodate for the needs of a growing immigrant population (*The Guardian* February 11, 2021). Some Finland–Swedish politicians and media were concerned that this was a sneaky way of weakening the position of Swedish. In general, however, English is seldom juxtaposed against Swedish in the Finnish language debates, except perhaps in the discussions on Nordic cooperation.

The English invasion

In terms of foreign languages, English has undoubtedly become dominant, even hegemonic in the Nordic region. The majority of the population knows English, usually at a quite advanced level (see Chapter 1). For most Nordic citizens, it is also the first foreign language that they learn in school and the primary language used in international interaction, both professionally and for leisure. As is emphatically clear from the other chapters in this volume, the worry today

is not merely that English is outcompeting every other foreign language, but that the national languages themselves are becoming threatened (Höglin 2002).

It is worth remembering, however, that the dominance of English in the Nordic region is very much a post-World War II phenomenon. In the early 20th century, the foreign language landscape in the Nordic region was more evenly divided between English, French, and German (and in Finland, Russian). There were regional, political and personal variations, but learned people were usually expected to know all three languages, at least to some degree. English had a strong position because of the historical prominence of the British Empire and because of a latent admiration for the USA, which, for many, not least within the labor movement, represented the dream of a more prosperous and democratic future (Cabau-Lampa 2005; Slagstad 2001; Sørensen and Petersen 2005). The number of emigrants to the USA was high particularly in Norway (second only to Ireland in American emigrants per capita; see Chapter 3), but also in various regions of Finland and Sweden. French, in turn, enjoyed support not only because of the position of Paris as a center for art and literature, but also as it was a traditional language of diplomacy, it had established itself as a center of organized international cooperation during the "first globalization" at the turn of the 20th century (Wright 2004, 118–135).

Traditionally, however, German was overall the main foreign language in the region. This had been the case at least since the Hanseatic Age or the Lutheran Reformation, not merely because of the strong linguistic affinity with the Scandinavian languages, but because the Nordic region in many respects belonged to the German cultural and political sphere (Cabau-Lampa 2005), but with some regional differences. Facing the northern Atlantic Ocean, Iceland and Norway had a great interest in Britain, both as a companion and as a competitor for fishing territories. In Denmark, the German language has a presence because of the 10–15,000 people-strong minority in southern Jutland. The proximity to Germany makes good relations and linguistic skills important, but there is also an anxiety about German imperialism, not least following the conflicts over Schleswig and Holstein in the mid-19th century. In Finland, by contrast, German contacts have often balanced Russian influence, and it took a bit longer for English to replace German as the first foreign language in schools or as an academic language. There were also different political connotations to the three dominant foreign languages: conservatives tended to prefer German, while liberals usually opted for either French or English. Cultural and political elites promoted French and German, while the middle classes wanted to learn English (Cabau-Lampa 2005).

Ultimately, it was mostly the outcome of World War II that brought about the turn to English in the Nordic region. The Anglo-Americanization of Nordic politics (NATO and anti-communism, for example in the form of *The Reader's Digest*), academia (Rockefeller grants, institutional support) and culture

(Hollywood, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Coca-Cola) has been subject to many interesting studies which point at a combination of American (and British) cultural imperialism as well as active appropriation at the receiving Nordic end (Åström and Kuorelahti 2021; O'Dell 1997; Sørensen and Petersen 2005; Thue 2006; see also Chapter 4).

There is a contemporary habit among European intellectuals to deplore how their own particular country has surrendered their national culture and language to American dominance, but there is a good case to claim that the level of enthusiasm for the English language and Anglo-American culture was particularly strong in the Nordic region. One can point to certain affinities in cultural values (protestant individualism) and to connections born out of the 19th-century emigration (see Chapter 3). More important, however, was arguably the fact that the Nordic countries since at least the early 19th century had accepted their position as small countries at the fringes of European civilization, and their fate as "translation cultures" (Stenius 2004). Nordic intellectuals knew that the "real" discussions were taking place elsewhere and in foreign languages, and that they had to travel abroad and learn foreign languages to take part in these discussions. Indeed, the very role of an academic, author, or artist in a peripheral culture was to act as an importer or translator from "more advanced" cultures (Nygård and Strang 2016). Peripheral cultures are forced into a form of flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances, and there was undoubtedly something extraordinarily unsentimental in how the Nordic countries put aside years of engagement with German culture and language in favor of embracing the new Anglo-American hegemony. Learning English and knowing American (and to some extent British) culture became a sign of modernity and progressivity already in the 1930s (Marklund and Stadius 2010; Thue 2006).

There are always good reasons to be skeptical toward the global dominance of English, as achieved not only through the soft power of popular culture, but also by brutal colonial violence (de Swaan 2001; Wright 2004). Of course, in the Nordic region, there was little in terms of violent subjugation, and as such, it would perhaps make more sense to understand the triumph of English in terms of "self-colonization" (Kiossev 1995; Nygård, Strang and Jalava 2018). From this perspective, the difference between the local and the colonizing culture is not as categorical; instead, there emerges hybrid adaptations that themselves become part of the local national canon. Accepting the status of English as a global lingua franca has been one of the strategies by which the Nordic countries, as small, export-driven nations have dealt with globalization and become one of its main beneficiaries. To be sure, linguists are increasingly concerned that the advance of English is bulldozing local cultures and entire languages (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1997) but accepting and adjusting to a global hegemon can also be a conscious strategy for survival for a small society, whether it is 10 million Swedes or 50,000 Greenlanders.

The languages of Nordic cooperation: Are Scandinavian and English mutually exclusive?

The Scandinavian language community has been of huge importance for the political movements that have sought to unite or to enhance cooperation and integration in the region. The history of Nordic cooperation is usually traced back to the Scandinavianist movement of the mid-19th century, and the Scandinavian language community was central from the beginning (Ekman 2010). Originally a movement among students who traveled across the Øresund for joint gatherings, Scandinavian (pan-) nationalism was construed around the shared Norse history, culture, and language (Glenthøj and Ottosen 2021). Whereas the aim of uniting the Nordic peoples into one nation failed, the Scandinavianists and their successors did manage to forge a shared Nordic identity, which did not compete with the five nationalisms in the region but developed into a fundamental part of them. The shared Scandinavian language was central also to the cooperation that developed in civil society and among professional groups such as lawyers, doctors, labor unions, etc., at the turn of the 20th century, as well as to the Nordic associations that were founded to promote Nordic relations in the aftermath of World War I (Hemstad 2008; Stadius 2019).

After World War II, when the Nordic countries founded the Nordic Council in 1953 as an official forum for cooperation between their countries, it was self-evident that the language of the organization would be Scandinavian, and this was also the case for the Nordic Council of Ministers, which was established in 1973. It was not until the mid-1970s when some Finns started to ask for an improvement of the position of the Finnish language in official Nordic cooperation. This was undoubtedly connected to the massive emigration of Finns to Sweden, and the slow emergence of a Sweden-Finnish identity. In 1976, the Finnish left-wing MP Marjatta Stenius (later Stenius-Kaukonen) provocatively used Finnish at the plenary debates of the Nordic Council, and already the following year, simultaneous interpretation to and from Finnish was introduced, a practice that in the 1980s was extended also to cover Icelandic (Wendt 1981, 68 and 314).

In terms of policy, the Scandinavian language community has been considered fundamental to the Nordic identity and has therefore had a high priority. The Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers have invested heavily in language courses, exchange programs, and in furthering primary school teaching in the (other) Scandinavian languages. Of high symbolic importance is also the Nordic Council Literature Prize, awarded since 1962, even if it is also given for novels written in non-Scandinavian languages (Mai 2016; Wendt 1981, 317–329). In 1978, the Nordic Council of Ministers founded the Nordic Language Secretariat (*Nordisk språksekretariat*) in order to coordinate and bolster cooperation between the national language councils,

but it was shut down in 1997 following a major reform and streamlining of the Nordic Council of Ministers after accession to the EU by Finland and Sweden. It was also the Nordic Council of Ministers that forged the previously mentioned Nordic language convention in 1987 (Agazzi 2017).

The politics of language has never been a straightforward issue for the official institutions of Nordic cooperation. The Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Minsters continue to prioritize the Scandinavian language community, but English is gaining ground. A major turning point occurred in the early 1990s, when the Nordic countries used official Nordic cooperation to assist the Baltic States on their path toward independence, and further on into the EU and NATO. The Nordic Council of Ministers established offices in the capitals of the Baltic countries, largely operating in English, and at the Nordic Council sessions simultaneous interpretation was offered in English to accommodate guests not only from the Baltic countries, but also from other regions of Europe (Strang 2016). Even if Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania never joined the Nordic Council/Nordic Council of Ministers apparatus, cooperation between the Nordics and the Baltics became increasingly important, and this cooperation – for example, within the Nordic–Baltic 8, NordForsk, or the Nordic Investment Bank (NIB) – takes place in English.

The role of English grew further in the new millennium as the Nordic Council of Ministers tried to respond to the international interest in the Nordic region by launching various region-branding programs targeting a global audience, for example, through the New Nordic Food initiative or the Nordic Cool exhibitions in Washington and Seoul (Kharkina 2013; Strang 2021b). English is likewise the main language in Nordic defense cooperation, which has developed quickly during past decades. Already before the Finnish and Swedish NATO applications in 2022, many of the exercises and strategic deliberations were conducted in English under NATO command and involving other non-Nordic NATO countries. English is also the official language of Nordefco, the organization established in 2009 to coordinate Nordic defense cooperation. Interestingly enough, the dominance of English does not seem to have been harmful for the language skills at the Finnish defense ministry, which has been praised for its outstanding competences in Swedish (Häggman 2013).

Surveys initiated by the Nordic Council of Ministers indicate that Nordic citizens think the Scandinavian language community is important. However, they also make it emphatically clear that people in general believe there are other things beyond language that brings the region together. In particular, people tend to point at the welfare state, the social and political system, and its values, as well as national security and defense. Language is usually relatively far down the list (Andreasson 2017; Frøshaug and Stende 2021). The most ardent supporters of the Scandinavian language community are not found within the official institutions of Nordic cooperation, but among Norwegians

and Swedish-speaking Finns. It is hardly a coincidence that these two groups also constitute the two most privileged partners of the Scandinavian language community. While the Norwegians tend to understand every version of Scandinavian, the Swedish-speaking Finns are usually understood by anyone in the region. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that the Scandinavian language community would be in a better state if everyone had the ears of the Norwegians and the mouth muscles of the Finland-Swedes.

As indicated previously, the great tolerance toward dialects in Norwegian society and public debate means that the Norwegians tend to understand various versions of Scandinavian better than Danes or Swedes. However, it also means that Norwegians tend to have stronger ideological beliefs about language, dialects, and the Scandinavian language community. Norwegian politicians at the Nordic Council often speak passionately about the importance of understanding neighbor languages (*nabospråk*), and the Norwegian Nordic Association has prioritized language as a key element of the "Nordicness" they seek to promote. Since 2010 they have been awarding an annual Nordic language prize to an individual or an institution "who in an innovative manner contributes to strengthening Nordic language comprehension" (*styrke den nordiske språkforståelsen*). Looking at the previous winners, however, the prize undoubtedly seems to be focusing on the *Scandinavian* language community rather than on the trans-Nordic comprehension of other Nordic languages such as, for example, Finnish or the Sámi languages – let alone English (*Foreningen Norden i Norge*, 2023).

The Scandinavian language community is cherished by the Swedish-speaking Finns because it provides them with an argument in defense of the status of Swedish in Finland. If intra-Nordic communication switches over to English, the special status of Finland-Swedes as a bridge to Scandinavia (or the West) is lost, and thus the legitimacy of Swedish as an official language in Finland is compromised. While the reasoning seems logical, it is also arguably a bit shortsighted. In insisting that trans-Nordic communication must take place in Scandinavian, the Swedish-speaking community is perhaps a bit too eager to switch its position of subordination to a position of dominance (Heller 1995, 379). More importantly, however, there is a risk that Swedish speakers monopolize the Nordic discourse for themselves, which hugely damages the position of Nordic cooperation in Finland, and thus also, by way of paradox, the position of the Swedish language in the country. The lazy practice in official institutions of handing over Nordic relations to a Swedish-speaking Finn, instead of to someone who is specialized in the issue at hand, is in itself a clear signal of the weakened interest in Nordic cooperation, but it also further contributes to the marginalization of Nordic cooperation in Finland. If one wants to improve the position of Swedish in Finland, one needs to make Nordic cooperation and the Nordic community important for the Finnish-speaking majority (Strang 2022).

Often, this means being open for English, because it serves as an invitation to trans-Nordic engagements on more equal terms.

To be sure, one must acknowledge the fact that there are differences in the proficiency of English among the Nordics as well, differences connected to social status, or the level of education, and other things that are important to be aware of and work against politically (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). There is no such thing as a neutral language in which everyone can participate on equal terms, but the mere fact that English is a foreign language to (almost) all Nordic citizens means that it can play the role as a third space for trans-Nordic interaction. No one is forced to surrender to the neighbor, something that might be especially difficult when there is no single and self-evident hegemon among the Nordic countries or languages.

Ultimately, it is a matter of reflecting on one's privileges. The Scandinavian language community is a prerogative of those who speak one of the three Scandinavian languages. It serves consciously or unconsciously as an instrument of division, which separates core members of the Nordic community from the rest. The battles with and against these (hidden) hierarchies have always been an issue for the Finnish-speaking Finns, who were also the first to revolt against the institutionalization of these privileges at the Nordic Council, but it is an issue for the Icelanders as well, not to mention those who speak one of the indigenous Greenlandic or Saamic languages. Even more crucially, equating the Nordic community with the Scandinavian languages risks alienating the growing number of people who have ended up in the Nordic region as immigrants. It is crucial for the future of Nordic cooperation that these people learn to appreciate the Nordic community, but it is difficult to imagine this would be happening in the Scandinavian languages. For someone who has learned Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish as a second or third language, it is not self-evident that this proficiency also provides a key to the other Scandinavian languages. For an immigrant in Finland, the Finnish language itself is enough of a challenge, and for them the Nordic community will remain a mystery if it is dependent on their knowledge of Swedish. Indeed, perhaps we also should consider whether we, in putting too much weight in the Scandinavian language community, are narrowing our definition of "Nordic" a bit too much. Is there a danger that "Nordicness" becomes too much a matter of local, historical, and even genetic relations? Such considerations quickly veer into exclusive and nationalistic discourse.

Finally, is it really a binary choice between English and Scandinavian? If we frame the future of the Scandinavian language community as dependent on standing firm against the advance of English, we are setting ourselves up for a battle we cannot win – or indeed, a battle we have already lost. Whether we like it or not, English is already the primary lingua franca, not merely for intra-Nordic communication, but for much of what we do in our working lives and particularly what the younger generations do in their daily lives. Stubbornly insisting on

speaking Scandinavian at every Nordic meeting is counterproductive, as it tends to exclude some speakers, as described in this chapter. English can serve as a door opener to the Scandinavian language community. In my experience from the academic world, one of the best ways of starting up a Nordic network is to have a first larger international seminar to which one invites a couple of non-Nordic guests, from Germany, the UK, or elsewhere. They serve as an excuse for arranging the seminar in English, which means that everyone is comfortable accepting the invitation and engaging in the discussions. The Nordic participants are able to get to know each other professionally and on an equal ground in English, but tend to switch over to Scandinavian during coffee breaks or dinners. After a couple of meetings, the time might even be ripe to engage in professional discussion in Scandinavian. In this way, English can sometimes serve to strengthen not only Nordic communality but also the Scandinavian language community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to reflect upon the role of English in the Nordic language system from a historical, cultural, and political point of view. The rise of English as a global lingua franca has undoubtedly meant that Nordic citizens, to an increasing extent, communicate with each other in English rather than in their own regional languages. The Scandinavian language community is in decline. At the same time, it is worth remembering that such a community always was and continues to be the privilege of speakers of Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish. Representatives of other language groups have often felt themselves excluded, and for them English can serve as a door opener.

The point here is not to argue that we should resign before the English invasion and stop protecting our national languages or, indeed, the Scandinavian language community. Neither is the argument that the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers should switch to English. There are still sound cultural and symbolic reasons for using Scandinavian, as the mere quest for a language community has important region-building functions. It is, however, also important that the institutions continue their efforts to be more inclusive toward the non-Scandinavian Nordic languages, such as Finnish, Icelandic, Inuit, or Saami. At the same time, the role of English will continue to grow, as foreign interest in the Nordic countries is likely to form an important part of the agenda of the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers in the future. This should not be seen as a threat, but as an opportunity to strengthen the Nordic community. The dominance of English in the Nordic region, as elsewhere, is the result of cultural, economic, and military imperialism, but there are nonetheless occasions where the English language provides a democratic space for communication on equal grounds. The Nordic community is a case in point.

The most important challenge for the Scandinavian language community is not to defeat infiltration of the English language, but to make Nordic cooperation and the Nordic community useful, interesting, and rewarding for as many people as possible. It is important to stop thinking about English and Scandinavian as mutually exclusive: the more we interact with each other in any language, the better. As such, Sanna Marin and Magdalena Andersson's English press conference should not merely be seen as a sign of a deteriorating Nordic communality, but also as a positive signal that serves to strengthen the ties between the Nordic countries – and thereby also, arguably, the Scandinavian language community.

Notes

1 I want to thank the editors of this volume, the ReNEW seminar and especially Tuire Liimatainen, Stefan Nygård, and Eeva Sippola for valuable comments on earlier versions of the chapter.
2 The exact number of migrants with a non-Scandinavian language is difficult to estimate. Among the Nordic countries it is only bilingual Finland that registers a first language of its citizens. According to the figures from 2021, roughly 480,000, or 5.8 percent of the population, had a mother tongue other than Finnish, Swedish, or Saami. For other Nordic countries, one has to rely upon estimates, which indicate figures between 7 and 15 percent (Parkvall 2015).

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