

Entrevista con... / An Interview with...

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Parallel language use in academic and professional communication

Britt-Louise Gunnarsson is Professor of Modern Swedish and Sociolinguistics at Uppsala University, the oldest university in Scandinavia founded in 1477. For several decades, she has been Director of the Unit for Advanced Studies in Modern Swedish (FUMS). Professor Gunnarsson has managed several large research projects, such as “LSP texts in the 20th century” and “Texts in European Writing Communities”. She has published extensively in the area of professional communication, LSP, academic discourse, text linguistics, historical text studies and multilingualism. As a compilation of her work, the book *Professional Discourse* (reviewed in this volume) was published in 2009.

Mona Blåsjö (MB): *In the 1990s, you conducted a large study on the parallel use of English and Swedish at Uppsala University. Can you tell us about it?*

Britt-Louise Gunnarsson (BLG): It all started when I was conducting a study on gender issues in PhD students’ seminars. We were a multidisciplinary group doing the study on authentic interaction in seminars within the faculty of humanities, social sciences and science. We found out that in the science seminars, the PhD students were speaking English, although they were Swedish. This was in the mid 90’s, and I was quite surprised. It was also before the Swedish authorities started the investigation about language use that eventually led to the new Swedish language law.¹

So this was the origin of a great survey at Uppsala University on the use of English, Swedish and other languages. It was an ordinary questionnaire survey, but it was big, covering all of the university, all disciplines, and it was the first time this was investigated. The results caused interest within the

academic community. Among other things, we conducted seminars discussing the results at Uppsala University.²

MB: *Your work was early in acknowledging the parallel use of speech and writing. Recent studies such as Airey (2009) have put focus on the different use of parallel languages like Swedish and English in writing versus reading and listening, and between the written and spoken mode. How do you look upon this recent research on, for instance, different competencies among students in understanding English and producing English?*

BLG: All students at Swedish universities have to read English textbooks and other literature. For speech, we have less strict norms for correct use, still students tend to speak less when the teaching language is English instead of Swedish. That is shown for instance in a recent PhD thesis at my department by Hedda Söderlundh (2010).

Initially, LSP research was completely about written texts. Now of course conversational analysis is a big area of research also in academic and professional contexts. There is a tendency in conferences to cover both writing and speech, but the two modes are not frequently investigated in the same study. I have always claimed the importance of studying both. For one thing, I wanted the international conference “Discourse and the Professions”, which was held in Uppsala in 1992, to cover both text and talk, and so did also the books that emanated from this conference, the ASLA-volume (Gunnarsson, Linell & Nordberg, 1994) and the Longman volume (Gunnarsson, Linell & Nordberg, 1997). Also, my latest PhD students have studied both speech and writing in the workplace.

Of course, different methods are required for studying speech and writing. But they are always intertwined. Like now, you are both reading in your notes and writing what we say, while we are speaking. It is often claimed that the digital revolution has erased the distinction between speech and writing, but we wrote short messages that looked more like speech before that, too.

MB: *Our special issue is about academic settings but in your work you have also addressed issues of multilingualism and parallel language use in other professional contexts?*

BLG: Yes. Overall, you could say that the tendency today is that the opportunities for parallel language use in professional contexts are not fully exploited. In a study on commercial web pages, I found that the possibility to offer information in several languages was not used to the extent that you could expect, considering the lower cost compared with printed information. In a recent project one of my PhD students, Marie Nelson (2010), found

that proficiency in other languages, like Spanish, was not efficiently made use of in the workplaces. Multilingualism should be seen as an asset for the company, but employees with these competencies are not always acknowledged and given appropriate duties. One striking result of this study was the hierachization reinforced by the use of English: Employees who had grown up in countries outside Europe and the English-speaking world often had no or a weak proficiency in English, and in a company with English as a corporate language, they had difficulties reaching more advanced positions.

The EU has had a significant role in arguing the case for languages other than English and for the importance of translation from and into national languages. The EU shows that there is not only a need for a lingua franca. There are ways of using several languages in parallel, as with simultaneous translation or interpretation. It is also used in international academic conferences sometimes, and it works fine. You sit with your earplugs and hear for instance a lecture in Portuguese being interpreted into English. It becomes a type of realized parallel language use.

MB: How would you describe the Swedish LSP research field and its contribution?

BLG: In the beginning of research on LSP, the interest was more in the language system, the terminology and syntactic characteristics. The big question was “What is language for specific purposes? What discriminates it from everyday language?” Also, the research was quite driven by educational needs. I suppose the main goal was to get a better ground for communication courses and the teaching of English as a second language.

In Sweden we have been more interested in the language practices outside the university walls and in investigating professional communication in authentic settings. How is corporate language used on the Internet and in ads, for instance? That is why I prefer the concept of professional communication. When I am asked to write about LSP, I usually switch it to professional communication. In my project on academic communication, we called it “LSP texts” (*facktext*) to emphasize a different focus from the lexicogrammatical one. Moreover, in Sweden this kind of research is more often conducted in university linguistic departments rather than in business schools or other departments dealing with business or economics, which is usual in other countries.

MB: In your earlier work, you argued for multilingualism at Swedish universities. Are you still of the same opinion?

BLG: If you mean that the alternative would be an entirely English-speaking and writing university, yes, I do. An entirely Swedish or national language university, on the other hand, is obviously not an option today either.

You have to remember that some disciplines, like law and history, are more locally situated. The law system of the Anglo-Saxon world is different from the one used in Sweden, Germany and other countries. There are not as many reasons for a scholar of law to write in English.

Recent studies, such as the one presented in Hedda Söderlundh's (2010) PhD thesis, show that students are more willing to discuss and ask questions in their mother tongue. Also, in undergraduate education, it is important that students can read and use their mother tongue to get a deeper understanding of the subjects. Partly, this is connected to the ability for the teachers and textbooks to put the new knowledge in relation to national conditions and societal circumstances. To become a deeper understanding, the new knowledge has to be in a shape and with concepts that involve appropriate associations and connotations. So, in the beginning of a student's education, the mother tongue is needed. But of course there must be a balance, English being introduced step by step, to get the international perspective.

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NOTES

¹ Since 2009 Sweden has had a special language law, stating the position of Swedish and other languages in Swedish and EU contexts. The intent of the law is to ensure the status of Swedish as the official language in all areas and to legislate the official use of several minority languages. The authorities are particularly required to use Swedish. See Editorial for further information and reference to the Language Act, 2009.

² The survey report shows a triangle with the angles English, Swedish and Other languages. The humanities tended to place themselves in the Swedish angle, while science was closer to the English angle. Closest to the Other languages angle were linguistic disciplines and theology. A subsequent study (Melander, 2005) has shown that the Other languages alternative has become more or less invisible.

