

Giving and receiving advice in higher education. Comparing Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish supervision meetings



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Abstract

In this article we compare advice-giving in academic supervision meetings at Swedish-speaking university departments in Sweden and Finland. Working within the field of variational pragmatics and analyzing interaction in detail we show how Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish supervisors and students, as experts and non-experts in an institutional setting, initiate and respond to advice. The data consist of video and/or audio recordings of eight naturally occurring supervision meetings. All meetings show a similar pattern regarding the frequency and sequential structure of advice initiation and reception. The main differences between the two data sets occur in how advice is formulated and acknowledged. In the Sweden-Swedish data, advice is often given with strong mitigation and responded to by upgraded acknowledgements. In the Finland-Swedish data, advice delivery is more succinct and acknowledgements are often neutral. © 2017 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Keywords: Advice-giving; Supervision meetings; Variational pragmatics; Sweden-Swedish; Finland-Swedish

1. Introduction

Advice-giving is a crucial part of all kinds of counseling. In academic supervision meetings, it is the core activity for the participants. The interactional organization of advice has been examined in several studies ([Heritage and Sefi, 1992](#); [Jefferson and Lee, 1992](#); [Hutchby, 1995](#); [Kinnell and Maynard, 1996](#); [Silverman, 1997](#)), including academic contexts ([He, 1993](#); [Guthrie, 1997](#); [Vehviläinen, 2001, 2009](#); [Waring, 2005, 2007, 2012](#)). However, none of these focus specifically on cross-linguistic or cross-cultural differences. Studies in the field of variational pragmatics ([Schneider and Barron, 2008](#)) have shown that pragmatic differences can be found even between varieties of the same language (e.g. [Tottie, 1991](#); [Tryggvason and De Geer, 2002](#); [Tryggvason, 2004](#); [O’Keeffe and Adolphs, 2008](#); [Henricson et al., 2015](#); [Nelson et al., 2015](#); [Norrby et al., 2015a](#); [Vismans, 2015](#); [Wide, 2016](#)). In this article, we explore advice-giving in higher education in Sweden and Finland from a variational perspective by addressing the following question: what differences and similarities can be found in giving and receiving advice in supervision meetings in Swedish-speaking university settings in Sweden and Finland?

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In accordance with previous research, we conceptualize *advice-giving* as an interactional activity, where information is offered rather than requested and where the information is given as a means to forward a certain course of action (Heritage and Sefi, 1992:367–368; Silverman, 1997:111; Waring, 2007:109–110; Vehviläinen, 2009:163–164). Example 1 shows a case of giving and receiving advice in higher education from our Finland-Swedish data set.¹

Example 1. Writing dates in academic texts (Finland-Swedish)

- 01 (4.6)
 02 SUP: datum får du skriva så här
a date you need to write like this
 03 (1.0)
 04 STU: mm
mm
 05 (0.7)
 06 SUP: konsekvent
consistently
 07 (0.3)
 08 STU: okej mm just de
okay mm right
 09 (1.4)
 10 STU: °nollan bort där°
no zero there
 11 SUP: så att å de här e ju direkt från engelskan
so that and this is PART directly from English

After a longer pause, the sequence starts with a piece of advice, in line 2, launched by the supervisor in a straight-forward way, i.e. without any preparatory work such as asking a question or opening up a topic. The advice sequence concerns conventions for how to write dates in academic texts. In line 4, after a pause, the student responds with the back-channeling token *mm*. The supervisor then, in line 6, specifies that the writing conventions referred to in line 2 should be used *konsekvent* 'consistently' throughout the paper. The student acknowledges this in line 8: *okej mm just de* 'okay mm right'. After a pause, the student, in line 10, explicitly states how she will adjust the text: *nollan bort där* 'no zero there'. Finally, in line 11, the supervisor explains why the formulation is problematic: *de här e ju direkt från engelskan* 'this is directly from English'.

In example 1 and throughout our data, advice is often given by the supervisor without introductory interactional work, and responded to by the student with tokens of acknowledgment and acceptance. Advice sequences initiated by the supervisor in a straight-forward way, i.e. in *medias res*, are common in both the Sweden-Swedish and the Finland-Swedish data. However, in similarly structured advice sequences there are notable differences between the two data sets when it comes to how advice is formulated by the supervisor and received by the student. These differences, e.g. as regards mitigating advice and the choice of acknowledgment tokens, will be studied further in this article.

The aim with the article is to demonstrate how students and supervisors in the Sweden-Swedish and the Finland-Swedish data handle advice-giving. The study is based on a parallel analysis of naturally occurring interactions in comparable situations in the two national varieties of the pluricentric language Swedish: Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish.² Through a detailed sequential analysis of how advice is launched and responded to in Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish supervision meetings, we discuss differences as well as similarities in the two data sets.

In section 2, relevant previous research is presented. This is followed by a description of the methods and the data in section 3. Section 4 presents the findings on how advice is given and received through a qualitative analysis as well as through some quantitative observations. The paper concludes with a closing discussion in section 5.

2. Background

The following section starts with a presentation of the concept of Swedish as a pluricentric language (2.1). This is followed by a discussion on previous findings on the pragmatic variation between the two national varieties of Swedish, and between communicative patterns in Sweden and Finland (2.2). Thereafter, the specifics of advice-giving in academic contexts are highlighted and the general sequential patterns are clarified (2.3).

¹ For transcription symbols see the appendix at the end of the article.

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