



Performance of unprecedented genres. Interdiscursivity in the writing practices of a Swedish researcher



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the sociolinguistic repertoire and writing practices of a Swedish computer science researcher and his first-time performance of unprecedented genres. Since the use of written computerese Swedish has no historical anchorage in the social practices of his discipline, texts-to-text relationships cannot be drawn from as models of action. Lacking this option, the researcher construes type and token interdiscursive connectivity from iconic Swedish and English texts and from prior discursive events of using academic Swedish orally. The resources comprising an individual's repertoire are, thus, significantly transposable across languages, modes and genres, when they are enacted in new discursive events.

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1. Introduction

Sweden is considered to be one nation-state among many where English, rather than the national language, holds a position as *the* language of science (see Ammon, 2001). For the most part, Swedish researchers from the hard sciences and, increasingly, in other disciplines use only English – and never Swedish – for scientific publishing (Gunnarsson, 2001a; Salö, 2010). The backdrop of these developments is that research products are increasingly placed on transnational markets where national languages are of little value. This forms the basis of a multifaceted and entangled set of problems that has recurrently preoccupied agents of the Swedish field of language planning since the early 1990s (Salö, 2014).

The strong position of English in Swedish academia is often held to have negative consequences that, on the one hand, concern language development and, on the other hand, affect the linguistic competence of Swedish researchers. These two perspectives encompass what Agha (2007) refers to as register-centric and individual-centric views concerning facts of competence. From the register-centric perspective, the sole use of English for scientific purposes is often considered to be problematic in light of the newly enforced Swedish Language Act (SFS, 2009:600), stating as it does that Swedish 'is to be usable in all areas of society' (section 5, official transl.). This phrasing echoes a lengthy discussion about language political aims for the Swedish language. One of the ways in which 'usable' is to be understood is that Swedish needs to be linguistically 'capable of being used' in all societal practices and for all communicative ends. English, in this view, indirectly causes disuse of Swedish as a consequence of the non-utilization of terms and discourse patterns. On this point, Gunnarsson (2001b, pp. 62–63) links current developments to potentially negative impact on Swedish scientific genres in a number of disciplines,

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while Melander (2001, p. 28) asserts that the exclusive use of English may result in a 'reduction of the stylistic spectrum of Swedish.'

From the individual-centric perspective, on the other hand, a number of Swedish scholars have expressed concerns about the Swedish competence of individual researchers. In this vein, Westman (1996, p. 184, our transl.) claims that '[m]any Swedish scientists experience difficulties writing in Swedish, because they are so unaccustomed to explaining and discussing their specialties in the mother tongue,' and Gunnarsson (2001b, p. 61) predicts that 'individual researchers will lose the ability to talk about their subject in Swedish.' Ultimately, such a scenario is feared to have negative long-term effects on the democratic processes necessary for having new knowledge transmitted outside specialist circles (e.g. Gunnarsson, 2001a; Melander, 2013; SOU, 2002:27).

Although the issues outlined above have prompted a considerable amount of concern at the level of language policy, they have not attracted much scientific inquiry. As far as we know, there are in fact no empirical studies whatsoever, anecdotes excluded, that account for the usability of Swedish, neither with respect to register-centric nor individual-centric views of competence. Consequently, little is known about the hardships that Swedish researchers from English-dominated disciplines may encounter when perchance they are confronted with the task of writing Swedish texts. It may thus be questioned whether the concerns that have been raised relate to current sociolinguistic conditions, and, if so, how this is manifested throughout the practices of those engaged in English-dominated fields of science in Sweden. To the extent that these issues have been debated in Sweden, they have more often than not been understood from the perspective of loss, imported from public and scholarly discussions of language maintenance and shift (see Block, 2008). In the logic of such a framework, specific registers, genres and terms are often framed as properties that a language once possessed but now runs the risk of losing due to rapid sociolinguistic change. We argue that statements of such language ideological discourse lack a historical account for language as an emergent, social phenomenon of human practice. They give privilege to overly static conceptualizations of discrete and linguistically uniform domains and assume that the ways that people relate to and use language are extractable units with an independent existence of their own (cf. Hanks, 1987, p. 670).

Our own position is that the emphasis on practice, discourse and performance in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics offers a more fruitful approach for understanding the complexity of these matters. This study therefore addresses language knowledge and the performance of genre from a practice approach, which takes particular interest in people's past and present engagements with language (e.g. Blommaert and Backus, 2011; Briggs and Bauman, 1992; Hanks, 1996). We examine an empirical case in which a Swedish computer scientist successfully writes two scientific texts in Swedish, in genres where written computerese Swedish has almost never been put into practice. We employ the notion of *unprecedented genre* to understand the scenario of an individual facing a discursive practice for which there are as of yet no conventionalized discourse types, and hence, the force of texts-to-text *generic precedents* (Briggs and Bauman, 1992) cannot be drawn upon as a model of action in performance. Lacking this option, the researcher patches together type and token interdiscursive generics (Silverstein, 2005) from similar prior linguistic practices, be they written or oral, in Swedish or in English, formal or informal, and anchored in computer science or elsewhere.

We will argue that this has important implications for discussions of English language impact on national languages in the context of academia. Meanwhile, we hold that the communicative practices of Swedish academia indeed encompass a number of sociolinguistic peculiarities that may contribute further to developing recent theoretical insights on interdiscursivity and sociolinguistic repertoires. Firstly, the results indicate that the resources comprising an individual's repertoire are significantly transposable across languages, modes and genres. The sociolinguistic repertoire, therefore, is to be understood as a unified construct rather than the sum of its parts stored in isolation, and interdiscursivity is the concept necessary in order to grasp the way in which old practices in the repertoire are reenacted as resources in new events of language use. In turn, and secondly, competence in performing genre is essentially an interdiscursive matter, and it encompasses more than merely experience in producing texts from the same a priori labeled category of texts. Facing the task of performing unprecedented genres, a person can draw on other linguistic experiences by patching together generics from similar texts in other languages, as well as from prior events of using language orally. This appears to support Hanks' (1987, p. 681) claim that '[b]ecause they are at least partly created in their enactment, then, genres are schematic and incomplete resources on which speakers necessarily improvise in practice.'

1.1. Approaching the issue empirically

It may be suggested that register-centric and individual-centric views on competence are two interdependent sides of the same issue. To say that Swedish 'is to be usable in all areas of society' implies a reciprocal relationship between sufficient linguistic resources at hand in the language as well as individuals capable of drawing on these resources. And these processes are intrinsically reflexive, in the sense that individuals develop language knowledge through their engagement in certain linguistic practices, while social formations of language, such as registers and genres, come into existence and expand over time through the linguistic practices of individuals. This article investigates the interface between these two perspectives as they converge reflexively in practice. We approach this empirically by making investigations into the writing practices of Kim Lind [our alias], a Swedish researcher from a technical branch of applied computer science, and his first-time performance of two scientific texts in Swedish: a technical research report chapter and a PhD thesis abstract. However, the scope here exceeds issues of an individual's lack of experience in writing particular texts. In point of fact, the texts of Kim's performance represent genres that are seldom or never produced in Swedish within his field and are thus not yet anchored in prior social

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