

Not fluent. But not dead either.



Rooftops along Monteliusvägen on Söder, Stockholm South, spire of Riddarholmen Church in Gamla Stan in the background.

You get pretty intimate with your classmates in a language course when you have to publicly talk about simple things that are important to you. On one first day of what were many “first days” of class during my 25-year quest to learn Swedish, we went around discussing what we wanted to do in 10 years. My classmates talked about getting married, having kids, and starting careers. I said I wanted to be alive. This especially shocked our 24-year-old teacher, who kept insisting I couldn’t possibility be that old.

I was 65. It was May in Stockholm and time for another run at learning Swedish. Never mind how many tries at attempted Swedish fluency I already had by this point, a new class was always an exciting time. Who would be my teacher? Who else would be in the class? How much would I improve in a month?

The first day of school when you’re 65 means you come out of your apartment wearing your new school clothes feeling as bright and shiny as the Swedish sun. You walk along the Monteliusvägen path with its drop-dead views of Stockholm, cross the bridge over Riddarfjärden, and stroll through the narrow 16th century streets of the old town.

Being a late-in-life language learner means you arrive at the folkuniversitet 15 minutes early.

Despite the energy that radiated off me, during that first class I introduced myself as an “old retiree.” “Tom,” my teacher said, “You should use a more elegant word: Arbetsbefriad.”

“Arbetsbefriad,” I said, tasting the word. It tasted nice. Like dessert. Translated, arbetsbefriad means “liberated from work.” The American equivalent might be “independently wealthy,” which I definitely am not, but I am in a situation where I only have to work for sport, big airplane seats, and now an apartment in Stockholm. And best of all, I have the time to take Swedish classes.

One language isn’t enough

It should be easy; it should be wonderful. Instead, it’s full of self-inflicted pressure. That day I shared another goal with the class: “Jag vill inte dö enkelspråkig” (I do not want to die monolingual).

Since I didn’t have as much time to reach this goal as the younger folk in my class, I felt stressed, even though I wasn’t sure exactly why I didn’t want to die monolingual. Did I need a good reason? All I knew was that my desire to learn Swedish

began in Gävle, on my very first visit to Sweden in 1988.

Gävle is an ordinary mid-sized town in the middle of the long, forested country. There, I found myself at a party in a private home along with 25 people, including doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, and my friend, an engineer and scientist who had invited Betty and me.

In this seemingly ordinary midsized town, which could have been located in Wisconsin, the dinner took place in four languages. Everyone spoke to us in English. Then, during the dinner, someone got up and gave a toast in German, and everyone seemed to understand. At my table someone told a joke in French. This was still at the time when I had enough of my now long-gone college French to realize that everyone laughed at the right time.

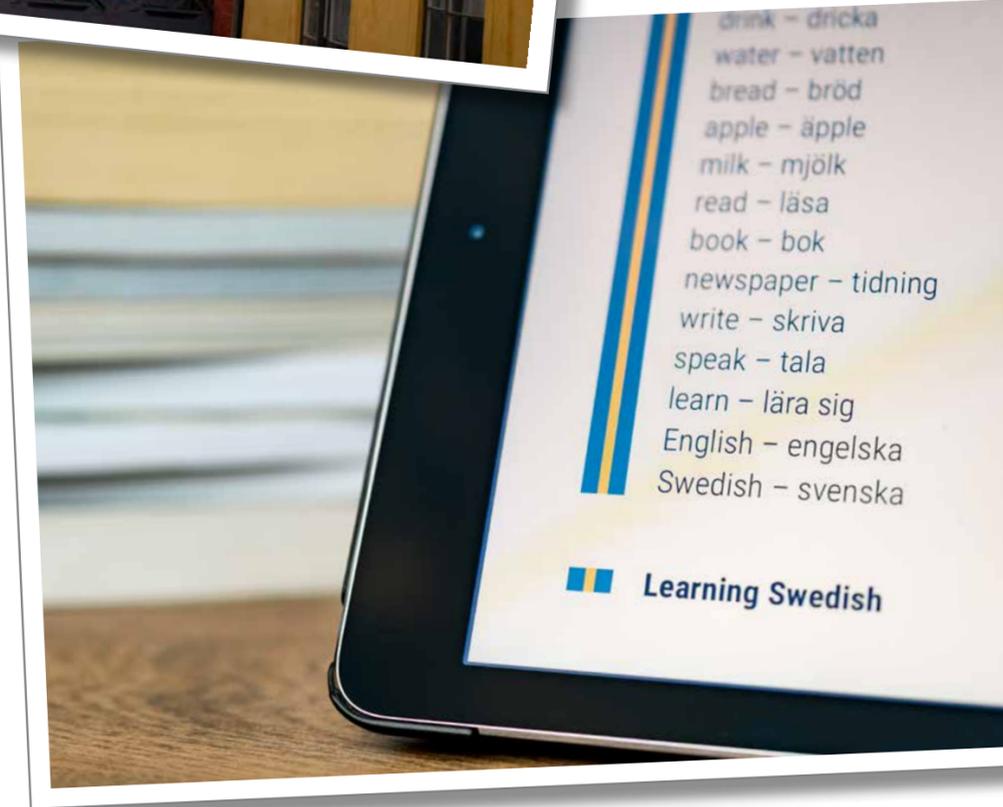
Betty and I were PhDs on the fast track at one of the world’s great research universities, but compared to these people, we were pretty much illiterate—one language. Of course we rationalized that if we had to know French to visit or study in a foreign country we would. But we didn’t have to and therefore we didn’t.

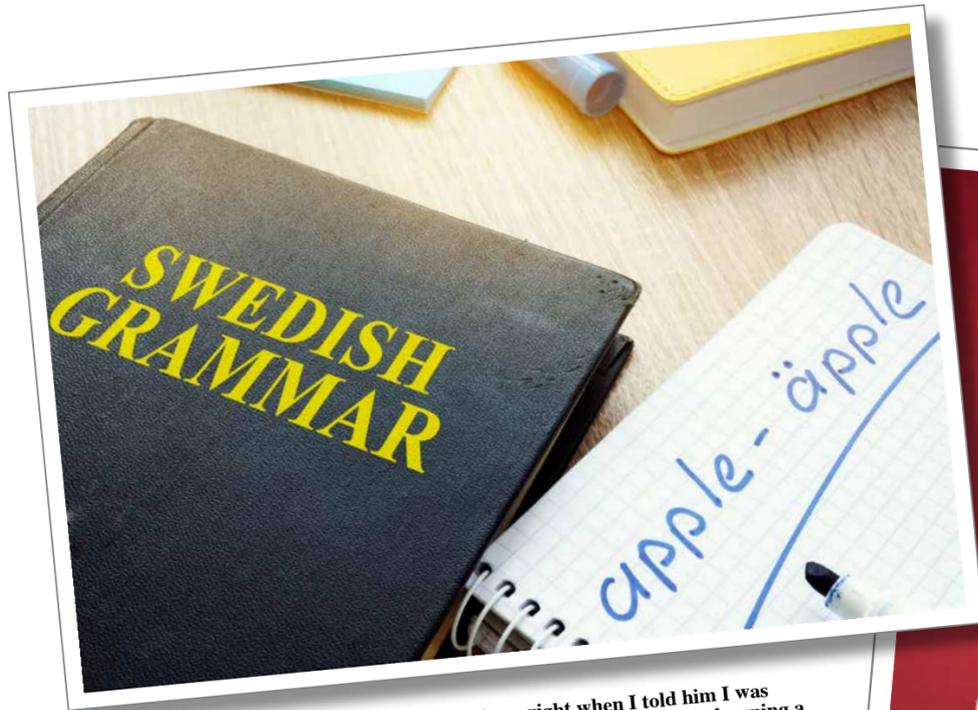
When we were getting our doctoral degrees, the academy was in the process of throwing out the language requirement even for PhDs—and we both slipped by. But what came out of that evening was the desire to learn and be fluent in at least one language other than English, to not be thought of in the world community as illiterate.

Pushing through the pain

The Swedish class that first day was tough. It was all in Swedish. I don’t know what I expected, but maybe it was to feel more like a PhD and less like an idiot. My teacher didn’t talk slowly or use simple words. She didn’t use the board to write down new words either. When we got a group assignment, another student had to explain to me in simple Swedish what we were supposed to do. By the end of three hours I was exhausted. I grabbed an International Herald Tribune and had a comfort lunch. Back at our apartment I had to take a nap.

My sinus infection didn’t help. When the infection would morph into my ears and both were completely filled it was like when you go swimming. The only time I could hear normally was when I





... my colleague from UW-Madison may have been right when I told him I was learning Swedish and he replied in all seriousness: "Too bad you are not learning a useful language."

The real key to Swedes' mastery of English is that American movies and television programs are not dubbed. Every day Swedes listen to a lot of English with Swedish subtitles.



was lying in bed in the early morning. By the time I finished shaving, the eustachian tubes would fill and I would be both hearing impaired and off to language class. Hearing wasn't exactly optional for language learners. This was not a very good way to go through life with the desire to be bilingual.

I realized at the end of the course that my teacher had looked at all my errors and decided I was a dilettante, just taking the course for entertainment. "Other students, you know, they have real motivation because they have careers and spouses. You will have to decide how motivated you really are," my teacher said. "Your score is so low. Do you even want to bother discussing your exam?" she continued.

I shifted from one foot to the next. She clearly didn't understand that I was highly motivated—and had given up a month that would have been much more productively used writing in English—but not very competent, and too incompetent to come up with a comeback. I wanted to remind her I didn't want to die monolingual. I wanted to tell her I was a professor. I had written a book. Where I came from I was smart. And I had worked hard! Instead I just shook my head and walked out like the illiterate and dead-to-her person I had become.

Is Swedish so hard to learn?

My Swedish incompetence seared my soul. I wanted the kind of fluency I could flaunt, but I just wasn't good at languages. I couldn't hear that well even without the sinus infection, my short-term memory had gone south, and I had never paid attention to or been good at detail. Even my English spelling was atrocious.

I was a mess. How could I want to be bilingual but not be interested in the appropriate ending of an adjective modifying noun? Despite repeated failures, I worked. Day after day, year after year. Sometimes I got up at 4:30 in the morning when I was rested and brighter to finish my lessons. Even though I am arbetsbefriad, I at least wanted my Swedish to reflect some of the amount of effort I was putting into it.

My workbook came with a correction book, and it was particularly frustrating to struggle with an assignment for an hour and be absolutely sure I had everything right, then to find I had half wrong—and not even know why. My essays came back full of red ink. In one 139-word essay I made 31 mistakes. Each day I felt worse about my ability. On the positive side, I got lots of strokes from Betty, who had never seen me

work so hard or so persistently.

Sometimes it even struck me that my colleague from UW-Madison was right when I told him I was learning Swedish and he replied in all seriousness: "Too bad you are not learning a useful language."

Swedes tell me Swedish is such a hard language but I tell them it isn't. Finnish is hard, Chinese is hard, Thai is hard, but not Swedish. Swedish, like English, is a Germanic language, so it has much the same structure as English. Something like 40 percent of the words are cognates or close cognates to English. While they may not sound like English when pronounced, the following words look a lot like English, attityd, telefon, nummer. For Germans it is a small step to learning Swedish (with of course an accent that is so broad even I can tell that it is a German speaking Swedish).

But others speak English so well

The biggest problem with learning Swedish is that Swedes speak such excellent English. My colleagues write and often even teach in English. Store clerks, bus drivers, waiters, taxi drivers all speak English. So when you speak bad Swedish (the only kind I know) they all go immediately to English. They like speaking English and show-

ing off their prowess. This isn't true only in Stockholm. Even in small towns and rural areas most people speak English. Swedes begin learning English when they are about 8 years old and continue for the next 10 years. But the real key to their mastery is that the American movies and television programs are not dubbed. Swedes see a lot of films in English with Swedish subtitles.

In Germany and Spain, on the contrary, the movies and most TV shows are dubbed into the native language. A Wisconsin friend who came back from Germany years ago couldn't believe he had watched Hogan's Heroes (a comedy about a German POW camp—from a distinct American point of view) where the American prisoners and German guards all spoke in dubbed German. Our waitress at a small resort in northern Greece spoke excellent English but had never been out of the country. I asked how she had gotten so good, and she answered, "Watching American movies." Of course this sometimes backfires. She told of going to her English teacher and asking about the principle parts of "gonna." Her teacher claimed that "gonna" was not a word. The teacher must have been trained in British English and was not familiar with the Midwestern pronunciation of "going to."

The Swedes miss a lot of tourism opportu-

nities by not really advertising this language competency. If you want to go to Europe and not get put down by snooty French waiters, or get flummoxed by the German train conductor who couldn't understand being asked if there is a dining car on the train to Berlin—come to Sweden. You can get around, talk to the locals, and not be patronized for being monolingual.

Dialects and diacritics

The real barrier to learning Swedish is that Swedes don't understand bad Swedish. Most Swedes hear only perfect Swedish. Since so many non-native Americans speak English, even in the Midwest we get quite used to hearing English with foreign accents. Chinese English doesn't sound much like Italian English but there is enough commonality that we can still work it out. Swedes don't hear much strongly accented Swedish since the country is so homogeneous, at least it has been. So when I say words I am sure are pronounced correctly, I get blank looks. The cab driver asks where I live—I say Södermalm. He asks, "where"?. (Telling a cabbie you live in Södermalm is like telling a NY cabbie you live in Brooklyn). I say Södermalm again and again draw a blank. Finally I "sing" the word actually moving my head "Södder-MALM." Oh, he says



I just can't pronounce "ö"—no matter how hard I try ... a big problem because the first letter in beer (öl) is "ö." Then again, Swedes have as hard a time pronouncing "beer" properly in English as Americans have with the Swedish word "öl."



Photo: Stockholm Visitors Board/Jeppe-Wikström

Stockholm's south - "Söder" in the south of Stockholm, is considered one of the world's hippest neighborhoods.

"Södermalm." I agree and we are off.

The problem with Swedish letters is that it has three extra vowels, å, ä, and ö (like in Södermalm). Or, I suppose from a Swedish point of view one could complain that English is three vowels short. If you are going to learn Swedish you have to learn these vowels. I don't have much problem with å, which is pronounced "oh," just like the little "o" sitting on top of the letter, or ä, which is pronounced "eh," but I do have a problem with the ö.

The ö has issues even for Swedes. When describing the letter itself they don't call it an o-umlaut as a German or an American might, but describe it as an o with two dots or more commonly an o with "two pricks." You can see the trouble this could get one into. And it does.

The first month we were in Sweden we saw a full-page ad for language classes. All in English it told the story of a Swedish business man who was giving a lecture to 2,000 people in Paris. He is reported to have said, "My name is Jöns-son. That is just like Johnson, except that I have two pricks." The mere thought of such a faux pas would be enough to scare any businessman insecure about his English, to sign up tomorrow—no matter the cost.

Betty and I were tickled by the ad, first because

we could read it. Second, because it showed just how many Swedes could read English well enough to catch an off-color slang joke. We couldn't imagine the morning paper in Madison publishing such a double entendre in any language. Things are different here when it comes to sex.

I am not so strangely endowed as the aforementioned Mr. Jönsson but my problem with the "two pricks" is that I just can't pronounce "ö"—no matter how hard I try. And that is a big problem because it's the first letter in beer (öl). When I go into a bar and ask for an "öl" the bartender is struck as dumb as the taxi driver who couldn't take me to Södermalm. I say it again louder with no result.

In my very first Swedish class I once invited all my classmates for a beer on a beautiful summer day. My Swedish teacher, trying to keep a straight face, cautioned, "Tom, that is very kind, but you just invited everyone to go out for a glass of wool." Ull (wool) is how I usually pronounced "öl."

I stewed about this for years, grumpy that the Swedes could not hear just a slight mispronunciation. Then I began to pay attention to how Swedes pronounce beer in English and realized they have a hard time getting it right themselves. When they say beer it sounds like "bear," which

I think is cute. I wondered what a Swede would get if he wandered into a Wisconsin north woods bar and ordered a bear? It turns out I didn't have to fly a Swede over to Wisconsin to get my answer. I was telling this story to one of Betty's Swedish colleagues at a party. He told me of a recent visit to London. He was tired and not attending to his language when he went to the bar in a London pub to order a couple of dark beers and in his best Swedish-English said, "Can I have two big black bears." He didn't even get a glass of wool. The Swedes are good at English, but these beer drinking vowels are a special challenge for us all.

Kind of literate

Now, back to my struggle. I worked language exercises into my everyday life. On one trip to Stockholm I practiced my Swedish by going to three hotels and asking for a room with a view until I found the right one and negotiated the price in Swedish. Another time I tried and failed to get ice for my whiskey at a hotel reception desk. Then there was the time when Betty called from the grocery store with the order to have the rice ready when she walked in the door.

Rice? I should know how to cook rice but I

didn't. So I picked up the rice package, expecting the worst—directions in Swedish that I couldn't read. But then something crazy happened—I read the directions in Swedish. I made the rice!

Slowly, other victories came. I could read more and more of the front page of the Swedish newspaper. I could spend an evening speaking only Swedish with friends and not feel like I needed a nap afterward. I could negotiate in stores and hotels. I could read maps, timetables, street signs, emails, and yes, recipes.

I started learning Swedish 25 years ago and I still feel like I'll never be finished. I can't write in Swedish. I can't handle complex political discussions. I can't understand TV news—unless there are Swedish subtitles. I have a kind of literacy with Swedish. Does "kind of" count?

Learning is life

Just when I was feeling like a language failure again, I discovered William Alexander, the author of *Flirting with French: How Language Charmed Me, Seduced Me and Nearly Broke My Heart*. After trying to learn French at the age of 59, he concludes, "The truth is, not only have I failed to

become fluent, or even conversant, in French, but I have failed spectacularly—more so than I ever imagined possible."

This made me feel wonderful—and not only from the fellow feeling. Before and after Alexander's year of French study he had brain scans. His brain showed more activity when listening to French (compared to Japanese) than it did the year before. The brain scans showed that "clearly something positive happened." He also did a college placement exam in French before and after. His score before was 310—not quite qualifying him for first year college French and 418 after—just two points shy of admitting him to third year French.

More impressive than his French comprehension were the improvements in Alexander's cognitive function. He had been very low on many dimensions before studying French. So much that he was genuinely worried about his long-term health. Before the year of study, his word recall was at the 40th percentile, but after it more than doubled to the 88th percentile. His visual memory was at the 5th percentile before and 50th after. The total score had gone from the 55th percentile to the 84th percentile. He concluded, "I revital-

ized my brain merely by studying French. And as a bonus, I can order dinner in Paris."

I am writing this book in the middle of my seventh decade—and I have Swedish to thank for it. Because without my Swedish studies (and struggle), not only would I be lacking the stories but perhaps also the brainpower to make it happen. For that reason, I realize I have succeeded with my Swedish language goals: I am very much alive.

Tom Heberlein

Not Fluent. But Not Dead Either is a chapter and excerpt from Thomas Heberlein's upcoming book, once planned to be titled Falling in Love with Sweden one Mistake at a Time, with a present working title of Smörgåsbook—What an American can Learn by Living in Sweden.

Tom Heberlein divides his time between Wisconsin and Sweden. He is a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin Madison.

Discover Swedish

Our Language Class will be back with Lesson 9 on more common Swedish verbs in our next issue, #7, 2020



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