Not fluent.
But not dead either.

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 enspråkig” (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...
was lying in bed in the early morning. By the time I finished shaving, the ethnographic tubes would fill and I was both hearing impaired and off to 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 but not very competent, and too incompetent to make much more productively use writing in English—or don’t understand that I was highly motivated—so when you speak bad Swedish I was putting into it.

My workbook came with a correction book, but I never paid any attention to it or even read it. 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 colleagues and employers and others who couldn’t understand being asked if there was a dining car on the train to Berlin—come to 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. Even with subtitles they lose much of the impact.

My Swedish incompetence seared my soul. I 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 but not very competent, and too incompetent to make much more productively use writing in English—or don’t understand that I was highly motivated—so when you speak bad Swedish I was putting into it.

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Is Swedish so hard to learn? My Swedish incompetence seared my soul. I 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 but not very competent, and too incompetent to make much more productively use writing in English—or don’t understand that I was highly motivated—so when you speak bad Swedish I was putting into it.

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: English, artikul, 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-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 “gonna.” The Swedes miss a lot of tourism opportunities by not really advertising this language capability. 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 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.

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-natives 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 homogenous, at least it has been. So when I say words like "ö" 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 and draw a blank. Finally I “sing” the word actually moving my head “Södder-MALM.” Oh, he says...
“Södermalm.” I agree and we are off. The problem with Swedish letters is that it has three extra vowels, ä, å, and ö (like in Södermalm). Oh, 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 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 “ö” but as a noun as in an “ö” sitting on top of the letter, or ä, which is pronounced “eh,” but I do have a problem with the ö. I was told the story of a Swedish business man who couldn’t pronounce “ö.” You can see the trouble this could get one into. And it does. The first month we were in Sweden we saw a grocery store with the order to have the rice ready the next day. My Swedish teacher, trying to keep us all my classmates for a beer on a beautiful summer day. My Swedish teacher, trying to keep us 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 80th 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 revitalized my brain merely by studying French. And as a bonus, I can order dinner in Paris.”

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. Johann Ludwig, a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin Madison.

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

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