A New Variety of Swedish?

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Abstract

Many adolescents in Sweden speak Swedish with what appears to be a foreign accent. Whereas some people perceive their way of speaking Swedish as the result of imperfect or incomplete learning of Swedish, others argue that they speak a new variety of Swedish. In this paper, several arguments of anecdotal character are tested experimentally in order to investigate whether or not a new variety of Swedish is developing.

1. Introduction

One of the most interesting things happening to the Swedish language today is the apparent forming of a new language variety. The variety has an obvious relation to Swedish as spoken by immigrants, i.e. in 'learner Swedish' and in one of the manifestations of learner language, namely 'foreign accent'. Hereafter, the variety (or varieties) in question is referred to as 'Swedish on multilingual ground' (SMG). SMG's most distinctive feature is its foreign-accented "sound".

1.1. Swedish on multilingual ground (SMG)

During the last 15 years, SMG has received much attention in media, in particular the SMG spoken in Stockholm, the so-called Rinkeby Swedish (Kotsinas, 1988; Kotsinas, 1990). The classification of SMG as a new variety of Swedish is, nevertheless, controversial. SMG sounds foreign-accented to native speakers of Swedish, and it is mainly spoken by adolescents in suburbs and urban districts with a large number of immigrant residents, e.g. in Rosengård, Malmö (Scania). Consequently, the opinion that SMG simply is foreign-accented Swedish (the result of imperfect or incomplete learning of Swedish) is common, even among linguists and phoneticians. At the web page of the dialect research project SweDia 2000 (Eriksson, 2000), e.g., Rinkeby Swedish is regarded to be "broken Swedish in many different forms" (author's own translation). It is seen as a "makeshift solution" to a situation where the communicating parties do not have a common language to use.

1.2. The research project 'Language and language use among young people in multilingual urban settings'

The overarching goal of the research project 'Language and language use among young people in multilingual urban settings' (Lindberg, 2004) is to describe and analyze SMG. Speech material has been collected in Sweden's three largest cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. The working hypothesis is that a SMG variety exists for all three cities, and that these varieties have both regional Swedish features (that separate them) and common features (that allow all three varieties to be identified as SMG).

1.3. Purpose and hypotheses

Since the classification of SMG as a new variety of Swedish is controversial, a description of SMG needs to be preceded by an examination of its status as a variety. In the present paper, two well-known arguments of anecdotal character are tested experimentally in a perception test, and new claims about SMG (Rosengård Swedish) are made.

The claims that were tested in the perception experiment are: 1) that SMG can be spoken even by speakers without an immigrant background, and 2) that SMG is used only in some contexts. These claims are interesting to test because if they are true, then they contradict a classification of SMG as foreign-accented Swedish. Foreign accent, defined here as the result of negative interference from the speaker's L1 (first language), cannot occur in the Swedish that is spoken by persons who have Swedish as their (only) L1, nor can foreign accent be "switched off" in certain situations.

SMG speakers' mastering of the Swedish word accent distinction is also examined. The hypothesis to

be tested is that SMG speakers differ from L2 learners of Swedish in that they have a good mastering of this particularly difficult feature of Swedish.

2. Material

The material comes from the speech database collected by the research project 'Language and language use among young people in multilingual urban settings'.

During the academic year 2002-2003, the project collected a large amount of comparable data in schools in Malmö, Gothenburg and Stockholm. The speakers are young people (mainly 17-year-olds) who attended the second year of the upper secondary school's educational program in social science during 2002-2003.

The recordings are comprised of both scripted and spontaneous speech (for a discussion on the definition of 'spontaneous speech', see Beckman, 1997). The recordings include: (01) interviews between a project member and the participating pupils, (02) oral presentations given by the participating pupils, (03) class-room recordings, (04) pupil group discussions, and (05) recordings made by the pupils themselves (at home, during the lunch break, at cafés, etc.).

The recordings were made with portable minidisk recorders (SHARP MD-MT190) and electret condenser microphones (SONY ECM-717), and subsequently digitized.

3. Results

3.1. Background and context

The claims given in section 1.1 have been tested in a perception experiment. The experiment was designed in cooperation with Gudrun Svensson, Department of Scandinavian languages, Lund University (preliminary results were presented in Hansson and Svensson, 2004).

The perception experiment was designed to collect young people's views about the speech in the project database, more specifically, young people's views about whom of the recorded subjects speak SMG. Here, we will therefore only present a subpart of the results, namely those results relevant for determining the relationship between background and use of SMG (i.e. if SMG can be spoken even by speakers without an immigrant background), and the relationship between context and use of SMG (i.e. if SMG is used only in some contexts).

Note that by 'SMG speaker' we mean a speaker who knows how to speak a SMG variety (e.g. Rosengård Swedish). A SMG speaker is nevertheless not believed to speak SMG always. As reflected by the second hypothesis to be tested, SMG appears to be a language variety used only in some contexts.

3.1.1. Method

Stimuli were extracted from the research project's speech database, more specifically from the recordings made at schools in Malmö.

The stimuli are approximately 30 second long sections that have been extracted from spontaneous (unscripted) recordings in which the subjects primarily interact with friends and class mates. A total of 31 stimuli produced by 29 different subjects were prepared.

The listeners in the experiment were pupils from the same three schools where the recordings were made. 108 pupils participated as listeners in the experiment. The listeners attended the second or third year of upper secondary school and several different educational programs. In order to avoid that the listeners would hear stimuli recorded at their own school, and to delimit the duration of the experiment, each group of listeners only listened to a subset of the stimuli.

The stimuli were played once to the listeners over loudspeakers. The listeners were asked to answer two questions about each stimulus: *Does the speaker speak what is generally called Rosengård Swedish?* (*yes* or *no*), and *How confident are you about that?* (*confident, rather confident, rather uncertain* or *uncertain*). They indicated their answers on answer sheets.

3.1.2. Results and discussion

Let us first consider the relationship between background and use of SMG.

There is a clear relationship between immigrant background and use of SMG. This is not to be interpreted as a proof of SMG being foreign accent, however, since one of the functions of SMG most likely is to signal one's non-Swedish background. What is more interesting to note, therefore, is that the relationship between background and language use is not a one-to-one relationship. Out of the 23 subjects who have at least one parent who is not born in Sweden, ten were perceived as speakers of something else than Rosengård Swedish by a statistically significant majority of the listeners ($p<.05$). Four of them have one Swedish-born parent, three are born in Sweden by parents born elsewhere, and three are themselves not born in Sweden. Conversely, out of the six subjects with Swedish-born parents, one (E04) was classified as a speaker of Rosengård Swedish by a statistically significant majority, 85%, of the speakers (X^2 (1, n=88)=43.68, $p<.001$). Even listeners claiming that SMG cannot be spoken by persons without an immigrant background, classified E04 as a speaker of

Rosengård Swedish. Thus, SMG clearly can be spoken by speakers without an immigrant background, i.e. by speakers with Swedish as their (only) L1.

Let us now consider the relationship between context and use of SMG.

Two speakers appeared in two stimuli: E14 (arrived in Sweden before the age of 1, Arabic as L1) and E04 (Swedish-born, Swedish-born parents). In one of the stimuli produced by E14, the subject speaks to a friend, and in the other he speaks to a librarian at his school. The two stimuli were chosen as examples of two different types of settings: an informal vs. a more formal setting.

A statistically significant majority, 65%, of the listeners, judged E14 as being a speaker of Rosengård Swedish when asked to judge the stimuli in which he speaks to a friend (X^2(1, n=88)=7.68, p<.01). The stimuli in which he talks to a librarian, on the other hand, was judged as not being an example of Rosengård Swedish by a statistically significant majority, 68%, of the listeners (X^2 (1, n=88)=43.68, p<.001).

Speaker E04's two stimuli are both extracted from informal situations (in which E04 interacts with friends). One stimulus was perceived as a clear example of Rosengård Swedish (85%, X^2 (1, n=88)=43.68, p<.001), whereas the other was perceived as an example of Rosengård Swedish by only half of the listeners (53%, X^2 (1, n=88)=0.41, p>.05).

The listeners' responses to the stimuli produced by E14 and E04 show that SMG speakers can code switch between Rosengård Swedish and some other form of Swedish (e.g. the Malmö dialect or the so-called Standard Swedish). Rosengård Swedish is used in some situations (e.g. in interactions with other adolescents, although not necessarily with all adolescents) but not in others (e.g. in interactions with adults).

3.2. Word accents

It is a well known fact that L2 learners of Swedish find it difficult to perceive and produce the word accent distinction (Bannert, 1979). It has been claimed that prosodic features are even harder to avoid transferring to the target language (Gårding, 1974) than many of the foreign segmental features found in SMG. The hypothesis to be tested here is that SMG speakers differ from L2 learners of Swedish in that they have a good mastering of this particularly difficult feature of Swedish.

Swedish is a language with a lexically and morphologically conditioned distinction of accent type. A word's primary stressed syllable is associated with an accent – a 'word accent' – which is either acute (accent I) or grave (accent II). Phonetically, the

difference between accent I and II is one of F0 peak timing. The F0 peak of accent I has an earlier alignment with the stressed syllable than accent II (Bruce and Gårding, 1978).

The exact alignment of the F0 peaks varies between dialects. Accent I in Malmö Swedish/Scanian can be transcribed as a H*L accent, and accent II as an L*H accent, see Figure 1.
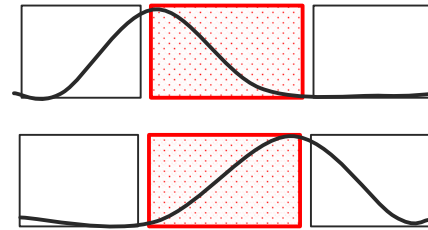

Figure 1: Stylized F0 contours of a Malmö Swedish accent I (top) and accent II (bottom) word. The middle square represents the word's stressed syllable.

The analysis of the grave accent as a L tone that is followed by a H tone is not unproblematic, however. It has been argued that it is the L turning point following the H tone that is a reflex of a tone rather than the preceding L turning point (Hansson, 2003).

3.2.1. Method

The perception experiment described above (in section 3.1), allowed us to identify ten speakers of Rosengård Swedish. There were ten subjects in the perception experiment who were perceived as speakers of Rosengård Swedish by a statistically significant majority of our "expert" listeners (listeners of the same age and from the same city as the speakers). The speakers are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Presentation of the ten SMG speakers.

Speaker	L1	Age at arrival in Sweden (years)	Rosengård Swedish responses (%)
E43	Slovenian	10	77
E06	Arabic	7	81
D27	Arabic	7	81
C29	Arabic	4	93
D49	Albanian, Turkish	4	85
C41	Arabic	3	88
E14	Arabic	>1	65 (and 32)
D31	Turkish	born in Sweden	87
C32	Arabic	born in Sweden	82
E04	Swedish	born in Sweden by Swedish-born parents	85 (and 53)

The speech produced by the SMG speakers in the sound files used as stimuli in the perception experiment has been analyzed with the purpose of determining how word accents are produced in Rosengård Swedish. Both auditory and acoustic analyses were made. For the acoustic analysis, the speech analysis programs Wavesurfer (Sjölander and Beskow, 2004) and Praat (Boersma and Weenink, 2004) were used.

3.2.2. Results and discussion

In the figures below (Figures 2-11), examples of the SMG speakers' productions of accent I and accent II words are given.
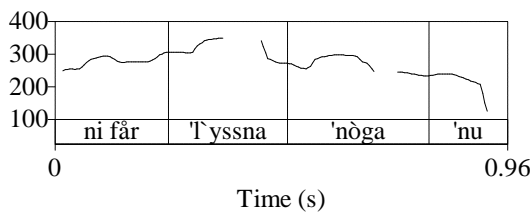
Figure 2: Speaker E43's production of the accent II words *lyssna* 'to listen' and *noga* ' carefully', and the accent I word *nu* 'now'.

E43's word accents are produced as typical Malmö accents, i.e. with a F0 rise in the stressed syllable of accent II words (followed by a fall in the postonic syllable), and a fall in the stressed syllable of accent I words.
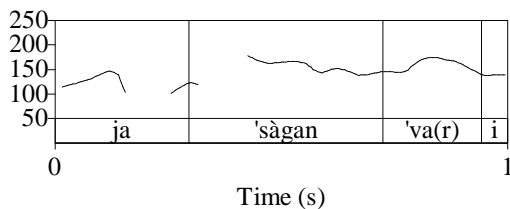
Figure 3: Speaker E06's production of the accent II word *sagan* 'the fairytale' and the accent I word *var* 'was'.

E06's accents are also examples of Malmö Swedish word accents. The accent II word *sagan* 'fairytale' demonstrates why one may argue that accent II should be transcribed as a late fall rather than an early rise. There is no clear L turning point preceding the H tone; the fall following the H tone is preceded by a F0 plateau.
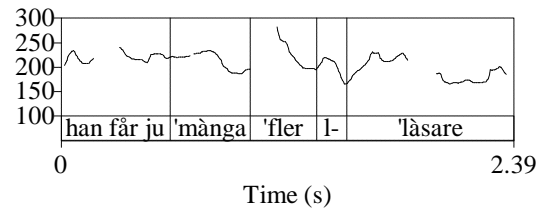
Figure 4: Speaker E27's production of the accent II words *många* 'many' and *läsare* ' readers', and the accent I word *fler* 'more'.

E27's word accents are typical Malmö Swedish word accents, although – as also seen in Figure 3 – the grave accent in the word *många* 'many' lacks a L turning point preceding the H tone.
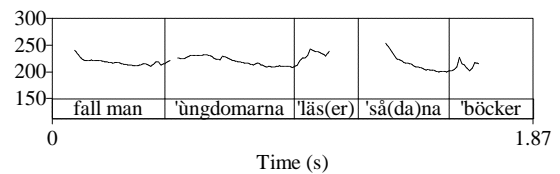
Figure 5: Speaker C29's production of the accent II word *ungdomarna* 'the adolescents' and the accent I words *läser* 'read', *sådana* 'such' and *böcker* 'books'.

Most of C29's word accents are typical Malmö Swedish accents. The accent II-like realization of the accent I word *läser* 'read' is an exception, however.
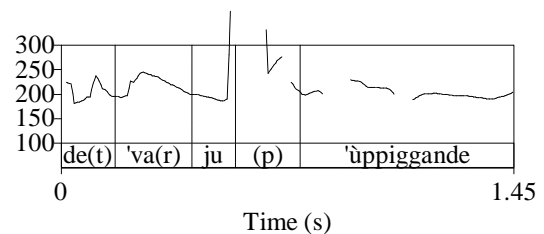
Figure 6: Speaker D49's production of the accent I word *var* 'was' and the accent II word *uppiggande* 'stimulating'.
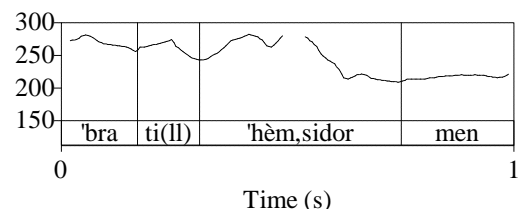
Figure 7: Speaker C41's production of the accent I word *bra* 'good' and the accent II word *hemsidor* 'home pages'.
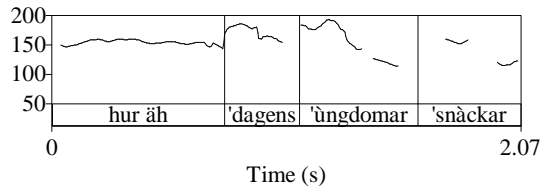
Figure 8: Speaker E14's production of the accent I word *dagens* 'today's' and the accent II words *ungdomar* 'adolescents' and *snackar* 'talk'.

D49, C41's and E14's word accents are produced as typical Malmö Swedish accents.
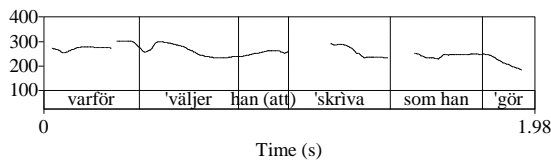

Figure 9: Speaker D31's production of the accent I words *väljer* 'choose' and *gör* 'does' and the accent II word *skriva* 'write'.

Most of D31's word accents are typical Malmö Swedish accents. The accent II-like realization of the accent I word *skriva* 'write' is an exception, however.
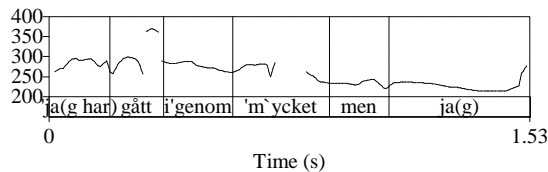

Figure 10: Speaker C32's production of the accent I word *igenom* 'through' and the accent II word *mycket* 'much'.
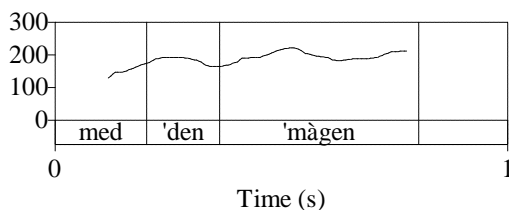

Figure 11: Speaker E04's production of the accent I word *den* 'that' and the accent II word *magen* 'stomach'.

C32 and E04's word accents are typical Malmö Swedish accents.

In summary, the word accents in Rosengård Swedish are, in most cases, produced as typical Malmö Swedish word accents. However, there are two ways in which they sometimes differ from the expected H*L and L*H patterns. The grave accent, L*H, is not always characterized by a F0 rise preceding the H tone. This is, nevertheless, a fact about the Scanian grave accent which has been observed in other data as well (Hansson, 2003).

The accent II-like realization of some accent I word is, therefore, more interesting. Although clearly observable in the F0 contours of the words in question (see Figures 5 and 9), the auditory impression is not always one of mispronunciation. Further investigations are needed. The tendency may reflect variation in the realization of grave accents in Scanian, i.e. not necessarily a feature that is specific for Rosengård Swedish.

The fact that most of the SMG speakers maintain the word accent distinction does not only indicate that SMG speakers have a very good mastering of Swedish, it also means that the most obvious way of melodically signaling a non-Swedish background is left unused. Varieties like Rosengård Swedish are primarily a medium for social functions with other group members. The group identity markers signal a non-Swedish background, or identification with a non-Swedish group of friends (Bijvoet, 2003). However, this particular way of signaling a non-Swedish background, is not used.

4. Summary and future work

In order to claim that the SMG variety Rosengård Swedish is a new variety of Swedish, we need to 1) show that Rosengård Swedish is not learner Swedish and 2) find evidence of linguistic homogeneity among the speakers of Rosengård Swedish. In the present paper, we have shown that Rosengård Swedish is not the same as incompletely or imperfectly learned ("broken") Swedish. Future work includes describing the linguistic features of Rosengård Swedish.

5. Acknowledgements

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