

# Foreign languages

*The changing nature  
of linguistic socialisation...*

**T**he Graduate School in Language and Culture in Europe started in 2000, with the purpose of providing a forum for research and graduate education in language and literature at Linköping University. Today, around 40 professors, senior lecturers, assistant professors and doctoral students are actively engaged in research and graduate education.

We take particular pride in our lively multidisciplinary seminar tradition. Language and Culture in Europe (LCE) is a place where linguists and literary scholars talk to each other, read each others' text and cooperate on, and in, many languages. We are convinced that both our linguistic research and our literary research profit immensely from this cooperation, as does our graduate education.

In this profile we present three socially significant questions that arise from our linguistic research, in particular our research on language teaching, our research on interaction with people suffering from aphasia and our research on interaction with people suffering from dementia, the latter carried out within the larger framework of the Center for Dementia Research (CEDER) at Linköping University.

We hold that interaction provides a unique window to linguistic competence, and that many aspects of language appear only, or most clearly, when language is studied in its natural habitat – conversation. Furthermore, in order to be able to observe linguistic competence even closer, as well as to contribute to vital societal concerns, we have chosen to study situations in which linguistic competence is challenged – in

processes of language learning and in conditions of linguistic impairment.

This research is carried out in collaboration with the University of Göteborg (principal investigator: Roger Säljö), University of Lund (principal investigator: Ulrika Nettelbladt), and CEDER (principal investigator: Lars-Christer Hydén) and Visual Learning and Communication (principal investigator: Lena Tibell) at Linköping University. Significant partners are research groups at Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, Helsinki University, University College London, UCLA, Université de Lyon 2 and Universität Zürich. The research is funded by Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and the Swedish Research Council

At LCE, research involves: principal investigators Jan Anward, Leelo Keevallik and Angelika Linke; senior researchers Mathias Broth, Richard Hirsch, Lorenza Mondada, Nigel Musk, Karin Mårdsjö Blume, Charlotta Plejert, Christina Samuelsson and Ann-Kari Sundberg; and doctoral students Lotta Alemyr, Alia Amir, Nazlı Avdan, Gwenaëlle Clairet and Ali Reza Majlesi.

The first question has to do with the changing nature of primary linguistic socialisation, which is language learning before school, at home and in peer groups. The following outline is based on the situation in Sweden, but we believe it can be generalised to most of Europe.

Ever since the rise of compulsory education, the learning of reading and writing has typically taken place at school. It is true that the upper classes have often chosen to educate their young at home and that the new

middle class, for the last 50 years, has been increasingly concerned with preparing their young for school well in advance of the actual school start. Nevertheless, reading and writing have for a long time been school things, with arenas of practice well entrenched in the educational system.

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This is now rapidly changing. Social media have now been firmly established as new forums of interaction, and, as a consequence, literacy has been drastically affected. Today children typically learn to read and write well before school start, and after school starts, they read and write significantly more outside school than during school time.

Moreover, reading and writing in social media are different to traditional school reading and writing. In social media, written communication is typically dialogical, displaying many features of everyday conversation, such as turn-taking, direct address and true questions. School writing, in contrast, is predominantly concerned with monological genres, such as stories and essays.

Interestingly, as Anna-Malin Karlsson (now at Uppsala University) and her colleagues at Södertörn University College have shown in recent research, dialogical written communication is also all-pervasive in contemporary work life. At least in Sweden, there are hardly any corners of society where you can escape having to engage in dialogical writing on a daily basis.

The question we want to raise is of course how schools are going to adapt to this situation. Will schools take advantage of this increased momentum in literacy and direct their efforts towards a more effective teaching of monological genres? Or will school writing change its nature and join the dialogical mainstream? Or will schools simply ignore what is happening and go on with business as usual?

The second question concerns another aspect of the changing nature of primary linguistic socialisation, and has to do with the learning of foreign languages. The learning of foreign languages is another traditional school thing. However, this is also changing, at least in one respect. In Sweden and other countries, where English is not a native language, social media promote not only early literacy but also an early learning of English.

At the same time, English is more of a second language than a foreign language in Sweden and comparable countries. Significant areas of society require active use of English. The increased importance of English in Swedish society is thus highly reminiscent of the increased importance of dialogical literacy.

How are schools going to adapt to this situation? Again, we seem to have the options of taking advantage of the increased momentum, joining the dialogical mainstream or ignoring what is happening.

Moreover, the increased importance of English also affects the future of other foreign languages. In Sweden, traditional school languages, such as French, German and Spanish, have always been treated as pedagogically parallel to English. This is no longer so, and we need to discuss the pedagogical options in this new situation where English is eclipsing the other languages.

Turning now to the other end of the lifespan, we find that as people tend

to live longer, aphasia and dementia are becoming pressing problems. More and more people suffer from such diseases, and there is increasing concern about the wellbeing and dignity of these people.

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Whereas certain forms of aphasia and dementia can be clearly diagnosed and, in the case of dementia, even slowed or prevented, most cases are still ill-understood and diffuse. Thus, in many cases, there will be no medical treatment available. An urgent question then regards how we can ensure that people suffering from aphasia and dementia have access to arenas of interaction where they can enjoy their full communicative rights as persons and citizens.

Traditionally, much of the training for people suffering from aphasia takes the same form as language teaching in educational settings. The idea is that such people need language relearning. Consequently, speech therapy for people suffering from aphasia is typically structured by a kind of language curriculum. This means that participation in speech therapy for such persons becomes very much keyed to linguistic correctness. As a consequence, persons suffering from certain types of aphasia often become engaged in long and agonising word searches, with unclear consequences for their daily needs.

However, if we give up the idea that people suffering from aphasia need

relearning and concentrate instead on forms of interaction that seem to work, we find that a mutual effort after interpretation, and a readiness for ‘ghost writing’ on the part of the conversational partners of people suffering from aphasia actually go a long way to restore these people’s communicative capacities and rights, and are far more beneficial to them than training involving elaborated and systematic language teaching sequences.

Interestingly, this means that the task of learning is shifted onto us who are not suffering from aphasia. We may not need to learn a foreign language, but definitely a new mode of interaction.

At LCE, we are now also looking at interaction with people suffering from dementia, within the larger framework of the Center for Dementia Research (CEDER) at Linköping University, and here it is clear that the practical conclusion we have reached with respect to people suffering from aphasia holds as well. The prospects for (re)learning are in fact even smaller for people suffering from dementia, and the efforts after such (re)learning are even more agonising for all parties involved. It is we, who are not yet suffering from dementia, who need to learn and this time the new mode of interaction we need to learn is actually bordering on a foreign language.



Professor Jan Anward  
Director

Department of Culture and  
Communication  
Linköping University

Tel: +46 13 28 40 37

jan.anward@liu.se

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