The effect of social factors on the comprehension of a closely related language

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Listening comprehension:

Norwegian in: Switzerland
Swedish in: Denmark
Danish in: Norway

% correct answers

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Sweden Denmark Norway Denmark Sweden Norway

Delsing & Lundin Åkesson 2005
Reading comprehension:

- Norwegian in: [65%]
- Swedish in: [80%]
- Danish in: [90%]

Delsing & Lundin Åkesson 2005

Sweden Denmark Norway Sweden Denmark Norway

% correct answers
Why do Norwegians understand the neighbouring languages better than Swedes and Danes?

› Linguistic factors (structural distances)
› Social factors (e.g. contact, attitude)
What is the role of social factors on mutual intelligibility between closely related languages?

- Delsing and Lundin-Åkesson (2005) found a link between contact, attitudes and sentence comprehension in the Nordic countries.

- Difficult to establish causal relationship between attitudes and comprehension (van Bezooijen and Gooskens, 2007).
Research questions

In comparison to informants who live close to the neighbouring countries, do informants who live far away

› have less contact?

› have more negative attitudes?

› struggle more with comprehension of the varieties spoken there than those who live closer?
Methodology

- In-depth contact and attitude questionnaire with 24 informants
  - 14 from northern-most province Finnmark
  - 10 from south-eastern province Buskerud

Honningsvåg, Tana and Alta: 450-650 km to inhabited Sweden, 2000-2200 km to Denmark

Hønefoss and Kongsberg: 150 km to Sweden, approx 300 km to Denmark
Methodology

› Dialect spoken in the two locations linguistically similar (Gooskens & Heeringa 2005)

› Contact possibilities extremely different

› Similar attitudes?
Methodology

- Internet word comprehension experiment with 157 Norwegian pupils:
  - 39 from northern-most province Finnmark
  - 118 from south-eastern province Buskerud

Honningsvåg, Tana and Alta: 450-650 km to inhabited Sweden, 2000-2200 km to Denmark
Hønefoss and Kongsberg: 150 km to Sweden, approx 300 km to Denmark
questions about:

• frequency of visits to Sweden and Denmark
• frequency of Swedish and Danish linguistic input
Example:

› How often have you been to Denmark?

- Never
- 1 or 2 times
- 3-5 times
- More than 5 times
Results contact questionnaire

How often have you visited the neighbouring countries?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of visits to Denmark</th>
<th>Frequency of visits to Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern Informants</strong></td>
<td><strong>Southern Informants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>More than 5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 or 2 times</td>
<td>3-5 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 times</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3-5 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- More than 5 times
- 3-5 times
- 1 or 2 times
- Never
When did you last visit the neighbouring countries?

Frequency of visits to Denmark

- Last year or more recently: 0%
- 1-2 years ago: 10%
- More than 3 years ago: 60%
- Never been: 30%

Frequency of visits to Sweden

- Last year or more recently: 10%
- 1-2 years ago: 40%
- More than 3 years ago: 50%
- Never been: 0%

Northern Informants

- Last year or more recently: 0%
- 1-2 years ago: 10%
- More than 3 years ago: 60%
- Never been: 30%

Southern Informants

- Last year or more recently: 10%
- 1-2 years ago: 40%
- More than 3 years ago: 50%
- Never been: 0%
Northern informants have had less contact with Denmark than southern informants have.

Although the same can be said for contact with Sweden, these differences are small.
Attitude questionnaire

> questions about:
  • attitudes towards Swedish and Danish language
  • attitudes towards Swedes and Danes
  ➢ Overt attitudes: descriptions on superiority, dynamism and attractiveness dimensions
Attitude questionnaire

Example:
› ‘How would you describe Danish? (tick the box next to the characteristics you find fitting)

☐ pretty
☐ cultivated
☐ repulsive
☐ cosy
☐ unattractive
☐ ugly
☐ correct

☐ attractive
☐ nice
☐ beautiful
☐ uncultivated
☐ amusing
☐ cool
☐ unsexy

☐ incorrect
☐ unalluring
☐ uncool
☐ interesting/fun
☐ boring
☐ sexy
Results attitude questionnaire

How would you describe the neighbouring languages?

Description of Danish | Description of Swedish

Northern Informants | Southern Informants | Northern Informants | Southern Informants

Positive Characteristics

Negative Characteristics
How would you describe Danish?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Characteristics</th>
<th>Positive Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Not attractive'</td>
<td>'Interesting/Fun'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ugly'</td>
<td>'Attractive'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Incorrect'</td>
<td>'Beautiful'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Boring'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Amusing'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Incorrect'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of informants in the NORTH who used this description

% of informants in the SOUTH who used this description
How would you describe the neighbouring peoples?

Description of Danes (N=107)  Description of Swedes (N=106)

Positive Characteristics

Negative Characteristics
Results attitude questionnaire

How would you describe Danes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Characteristics</th>
<th>Positive Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Pushy'</td>
<td>'Happy'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Sluggish'</td>
<td>'Jovial'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Snobbish'</td>
<td>'Talkative'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Unintelligent'</td>
<td>'Nice'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% of informants in the NORTH who used this description

% of informants in the SOUTH who used this description
Southern informants have a higher proportion of positive attitudes towards Danish and Danes than northern informants do.
Test words:

› 384 frequent nouns
› recordings of standard Danish and Swedish speakers
Intelligibility experiment

Procedure

› Internet-based
› Pupils in upper secondary schools (16-19 years old)
› Subjects listened to words via head phones and read words on the computer screen
› Translations into mother tongue

› [http://www.let.rug.nl/lrs](http://www.let.rug.nl/lrs)
  login: germanic
  password: guest
Results: Word Comprehension North and South Norway

% of correctly translated words: two groups of informants

North Norway  South Norway

Listening Danish
Reading Danish
Listening Swedish
Reading Swedish
Results: Word Comprehension North and South Norway

% of correctly translated words:

- no significant differences between the informants who live far away from Sweden and Denmark (North) and those who live much closer (South)
Is there a correlation between attitudes and word comprehension?

No significant correlations between number of positive or negative characteristics given by informants and their word comprehension scores.
Conclusion

› No indication that there is a link between language social factors (contact and attitude) and word comprehension (getest???)

› A possible relationship between geography (or higher contact frequency) and overt language attitudes (getest???)

› Same Swedish and Danish word comprehension scores among Norwegians from the north and the south
Thanks!

- Pupils at Tana VGS, Alta VGS, Nordkapp VGS, Hønefoss VGS and Kongsberg VGS
Results: Attitude and Contact Questionnaire

How much do you understand of news broadcasts in the neighbouring languages?

- Reported Intelligibility of Danish:
  - Northern Informants: 75-95%
  - Southern Informants: 75-95%

- Reported Intelligibility of Swedish:
  - Northern Informants: 95-100%
  - Southern Informants: 95-100%

Respondents were asked to rate their understanding of news broadcasts in the neighbouring languages on a scale from 1-25%, 25-49%, 50-74%, 75-95%, to 95-100%, with the option to report “Nothing” if they did not understand the broadcasts at all.
Results: Attitude and Contact Questionnaire

How often do you hear the neighbouring languages?

Frequency of listening to Danish

- 100% Once a day
- 90% Once a week
- 80% Once a month
- 70% Once a year
- 60% Not even once a year

Frequency of listening to Swedish

- 100% Once a day
- 90% Once a week
- 80% Once a month
- 70% Once a year
- 60% Not even once a year

Northern Informants

Southern Informants
Intelligibility experiment

Calculations

Percentage correctly translated words

› Ignoring spelling mistakes
e.g. Norwegian *terasse* instead of *terrasse* ‘terrace’

› Allowing alternative translations
e.g. Norwegian *lege* or *doktor* for Danish *doktor* ‘doctor’