ULLA BÖRESTAM UHLMANN. Skandinaver samtalar. Språkliga och interaktionella strategier i samtal mellan danskar, norrmän och svenskar. (Scandinavians in conversation. Linguistic and interactional strategies in conversations between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish speakers.) Skrifter utgivna av Institutionen för nordiska språk vid Uppsala universitet 38. 1994. Pp. 222. With a summary in English.

Reviewed by FRITZ LARSEN

If a Russian wants to talk to a German, they have a problem of language choice. One of them may attempt to speak the other's language, or they may agree to use a third language, maybe English. In either case, their ability to communicate depends on one or both of them having gone through the laborious process of learning a foreign language. They may also, of course, discover that they have no language in common, and drop the idea altogether.

Among Scandinavians life is easier. Here is how it is supposed to go. When a Norwegian meets a Swede, neither needs to speak a foreign language. Because of the close relationship between the languages, each may use his native language actively while relying on a passive knowledge of the other. In other words, they exhibit the behaviour that we expect in speakers of two dialects of the same language.

The characterization of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish as three mutually intelligible languages forming one speech community begs a number of questions. One obvious one I shall not pursue here: the futile search for a criterion to distinguish 'language' from 'dialect'. Suffice it to say that it is an established credo among Scandinavians that there exists a special category of so-called 'neighbour languages', i.e. separate languages which are not truly foreign to each other. The basis is similarity as a result of close family relationship and parallel historical development, so a non-Indo-European language like Finnish does not belong. Neither does a related language like Icelandic which diverges too much from the others to allow much spontaneous comprehension.

Intelligibility is a highly problematic concept. As most people know from experience, speakers of one dialect may find it extremely difficult to understand speakers of what everybody recognizes to be another dialect of the same language. And in the case of these so-called neighbour languages, the difficulties may in fact be so drastic that the notion of a speech community seems hard to uphold.

Einar Haugen coined the term *semi-communication* about 'the trickle of messages through a rather high level of "code noise"' (Haugen 1966:281). In the 1950s, he had undertaken a pioneering investigation of inter-Scandinavian comprehension, or rather of the informants' self-reported ability to understand the other languages and their expectations about being understood themselves. The investigation was methodologically flawed: it relied on questionnaires, the evaluation was purely subjective, and the sampling of informants was skewed. Nevertheless, many of Haugen's tentative conclusions have been corroborated by later, more reliable investigations, including controlled tests of comprehension, notably Maurud 1976. For a survey in English, see Vikør 1993.

Comprehension is not only partial, it is also lopsided. Norwegian is the most easily understood of the three, and Norwegians also score highest in the comprehension tests. The big barrier is between Danish and Swedish, and Swedes' comprehension of spoken Danish in particular is very poor.

A linguistic explanation for the lopsidedness is easy to find, and it was in fact pointed to by Haugen. Danish and Norwegian have largely overlapping vocabularies, Norwegian and Swedish share many pronunciation features, but between Danish and Swedish there is both a vocabulary and a pronunciation barrier to be overcome. The conservative orthography of Danish has preserved many similarities with Swedish and Norwegian where the spoken varieties have diverged. This is a help for Danes in their decoding of spoken Swedish, but to Swedes the pronunciation of many Danish words does not reveal an obvious connection with the recognizable written form.

A contributing explanation for the high performance of Norwegians may be that they are used to having to contend with marked dialect differences when communicating among themselves. They do not have the expectation of Swedes and Danes that compatriots will adhere to a narrowly circumscribed norm and that deviant varieties are too strange to merit consideration.

It is characteristic of the line of research since Haugen that the focus has been on establishing the degree to which the three languages are mutually intelligible. Some people must have had their high hopes dashed by the results.

For her dissertation, Uhlmann set out to do something entirely different. I have dwelt so long on the earlier investigations primarily to make it clear that this book marks a new departure. She wanted to get away from questionnaires and artificial lab tests of comprehension to describe what happens when Scandinavians communicate across languages. Her data are video-recorded conversations between six Norwegians, six Swedes and six Danes, in the various language combinations. Recordings of pairs of compatriots were also made for comparison. The participants were young, many of them students on holiday jobs in another Scandinavian country. As to background variables such as geographical origin or previous cross-border contacts, they were a motley crowd.

The core of the dissertation is the evidence extracted by a painstaking analysis of these recordings.

Uhlmann wants to focus on the meeting not of languages but of people. What options are open to the participants in this type of problematic communication? How can they find a common ground? There are two basic possibilities. The participants can survey the available languages and try to find what Uhlmann calls the linguistic lowest common denominator. Or they can use various interactive means to minimize misunderstandings and clear them up if they occur. It is with the charting of such conversational strategies that the bulk of Uhlmann's work is concerned.

The use of a lowest common denominator has often been pointed to as a typical strategy (see e.g. Hansen 1994). There are in fact two: (a) the use of a mixed 'Scandinavian' created by convergence, or even as the result of an attempt to speak another Scandinavian language; and (b) the use of a third language, in this case English, the common foreign language known from school. Haugen called the latter 'the desperation course' (1966:296).

Uhlmann found surprisingly little of this. But she is careful in pointing out that her data cannot be regarded as representative, that there was something about her experiment that may have biased the result. I shall return to that. Whether generalizable or not, the outcome here was certainly that communication problems were not solved to any great extent by using words from a neighbour language or by going via English. The normal means was the utilization of the resources of the mother tongue.

The way that the participants tried to overcome the handicaps is revealed by the conversation analysis. Attempts to prevent problems from occurring included simplification of content, more use of non-verbal means, spontaneous reformulations. On the listener's part there was extensive use of requests for repetition, clarification and confirmation. Compared to the conversations between compatriots, it was calculated that there were three times as many repair sequences.

What was characteristic of the conversations was not so much the incidence of actual misunderstandings as the halting pattern of progress, with constant focusing on the language rather than the content of the conversation.

It is no wonder that the high level of concentration needed to maintain this problematic communication placed a strain on the participants.

Although Uhlmann says that she wanted to look at encounters between people rather than between languages, there is much international comparison in the analysis. Although we come to know the eighteen participants as individual persons with individual characteristics, they are repeatedly lumped together into three groups: the Norwegians, the Danes, the Swedes. Despite the protestations of the author, I should be surprised if the results are not adduced by others as evidence of what Norwegians in general do as opposed to Danes and Swedes. The reservations that follow are meant to serve as my underlining of the author's own warnings against overgeneralization.

Uhlmann's main findings about choice of what she calls the linguistic lowest common denominator were: (a) that there was little use of a mix of languages, a conglomerate 'Scandinavian'; (b) that there was little use of English.

As to (a), the low result jars with the observations of many other people. For what it is worth, I would add my own experience of Danes adapting to Swedish pronunciation and adopting Swedish vocabulary. The discrepancy is probably due to the existence of different levels of familiarity with inter-Scandinavian communication. In order to use a Scandinavian mix you must have some knowledge of the other languages. Most of the participants here were novices and probably not *able* to say much in another Scandinavian language at this stage. In fact, the only participant who did try to use another Scandinavian language – because he doubted that his own variety of Norwegian would be understood – could only produce a kind of pidgin.

Not that attempts at 'Scandinavian' are always a success. Accommodation is a feature of all communication, but it takes a fairly high level of linguistic knowledge and awareness to adapt your own language in such a way that you remove the worst obstacles instead of simply waving a random assortment of Scandinavian flags. In many instances, the use of 'Scandinavian' is not helpful at all, as when words are exchanged which the participants know anyway. It is not a rare situation to hear Danes going out of their way to use Swedish words like *fönster* ('window') with the Swedes simultaneously using the Danish *vindue*.

As to (b), it appears that the situation and the instructions made the participants think of the experiment as a test of their ability to communicate using their respective native languages. They were told that the purpose was to study 'how we understand each other in Scandinavia' (p. 73). They may well have drawn the conclusion that there was a ban on using English. How much English is resorted to in general among Scandinavians, we do not know.

It is interesting to note that the author refuses to believe the participants when some of them claim that it is less tiring to speak English (p. 130). It is no doubt true that many young Scandinavians have wildly exaggerated ideas of their own proficiency in English. Many of them would certainly have a hard time if they had to take a test in the comprehension of English as spoken by native speakers of English – without vocabulary restrictions and with strange accents. But when it comes to the use of English as a lingua franca among non-native speakers, they may have more of a case. Many of them are quite adept at communicating in a restricted version of English, which they largely share with other Scandinavians of the same age and background – and which they will, of course, need in any case with non-Scandinavians. The communication will be semantically restricted, devoid of subtleties, but fluent.

In the inter-Scandinavian use of their own languages, however, the restrictions will appear unpredictable. Going from one Scandinavian language to another is not just a question of cracking a code, there are unsystematic differences, too. In Scandinavian semi-communication, some complicated messages may be effortlessly decoded, while there are recurrent breakdowns occasioned by unexpected differences in the basic vocabulary. (The appearance of a seemingly harmless Danish word like *kun* ('only') will throw many Swedes off the track.) It is quite possible for a fairly high level of information exchange to be accompanied by a deeply felt frustration because of the lack of fluency.

The investigation of Scandinavians in conversation is set within Uhlmann's reconsideration of the concept of speech community. It is obvious that an attempt to use the criterion of linguistic similarity alone runs into difficulties. Quite apart from the problems of determining what similarity means and how much similarity it takes for two varieties to belong to the same community, there is the existence of striking differences between individuals. The Scandinavian speech community is more of a community to some people than to others. More than the linguistic facts must be involved.

Following Joshua Fishman, Uhlmann complements the criterion of linguistic similarity by introducing two further aspects: interaction and symbolic integration. Broadly speaking, interaction is linked to a sociological approach, while symbolic integration is psychological and political in nature, the expression of a felt identity.

For a community to exist, people must interact. A number of variables are involved here: geographical proximity, TV reception, travel patterns, family connections, youth exchanges, professional contacts. The ability to perceive and exploit the linguistic basis increases with increased exposure.

So does the feeling of belonging together, the foundation of symbolic integration. A speech community is also something that is created by a will to understand. This positive attitude has its origin in a feeling of shared history and culture. And it is reinforced as a social norm through education.

One should not underestimate the effect that Scandinavianism as an ideology has on people's perception of what is possible and their willingness to put in the extra effort needed for semi-communication to work. Unfortunately, the very existence of an ideology makes it difficult to get at the facts about the Scandinavian speech community. As the Danish linguist Erik Hansen puts it (1994:190) this is a field where there is no tradition of distinguishing sharply between ideal and reality.

Many discussions reveal an undercurrent of wishful thinking: there *ought* to be spontaneous understanding by everybody; if there are initial difficulties, surely they can be overcome; all it takes is a little effort, and any self-respecting Scandinavian ..., etc. It is as if the much-lauded naturally existing speech community must be brought about by persuasion. That leaves open the possibility that not all Scandinavians are persuaded.

Uhlmann's explication of the three intertwined aspects is a welcome reminder that speech communities consist of people. Their ability to understand may vary drastically. That is the result of many factors, of which purely linguistic ones may not be the most important.

She rightly discards the idea of a spontaneous mutual intelligibility made possible simply by the relatedness of the languages. This pristine coming together of languages does not exist in the real world. Languages are spoken by people, and people have histories.

Scandinavians are individuals who have to varying degrees been exposed to the other languages. They have also been exposed to – and have to varying degrees accepted – the ideological credo that the languages ought to be mutually intelligible. The result is complexity.

For some there is indeed an indisputable smoothly working speech community. For others there is semi-communication of the strenuous type described by Uhlmann. For others again there is, if not a complete blank, then an outright rejection of the possibility of useful communication.

One could also add to the complexity by mentioning, as Uhlmann does, the special difficulties of the considerable number of people who have had to learn one of the three languages as a second language, be their mother tongue an indigenous language like Finnish or an immigrant language like Turkish.

Against this background, the calculation of national averages becomes less appealing. And not only is the situation complex, it is also unstable. The speech community is not given, it comes about as a result of exposure and learning. People will learn if they need to and if they feel rewarded for their effort. If they do not, linguistic similarity – even with a supporting ideology – will not be enough to make the speech community a living reality.

I consider this dissertation a valuable and timely contribution, for two reasons. Firstly, it shifts the focus of attention to what actually happens when Scandinavians communicate – or try to. Secondly, by applying Fishman's concepts, it leads on to a fruitful discussion of the complex that constitutes the Scandinavian speech community – to the extent that it exists.

In addition, Uhlmann must be commended for her ability to extract and explain the relevant results of her experiments. And the text is written in a style that makes it accessible also to the non-specialist – provided that he or she reads Swedish, of course. Some Norwegians and Danes do, to some extent.

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