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Experiences from Nordic research collaboration

(The ScanDiaSyn meeting, Leikanger)

1. Introduction

The aim of this talk is to inform you about another network for Nordic research collaboration and to present our experiences from there, i.e. the project "Modern loanwords in the languages of the Nordic countries (*MIN – Moderne importord i språka i Norden*)", which is still functioning.

I do not know about any large-scale collaborative projects in linguistics between the Nordic countries other than these two, namely MIN and ScandiaSyn. There has, of course, been much collaboration between individual scholars, but no network organizing 30 and 50 members from all Nordic countries and being financed by Nordic funds for several years.

There are quite a lot of Nordic organisations and institutions, and there are several funds. However, few of the funds have research within the humanities as a goal, and the funds are too small for projects involving full-time scholars. Politically it is, therefore, very important to establish a tradition of Nordic research and of submitting large-scale applications to the various funds, because that may have an impact on the future organisation of the research policy. Nordic politicians do observe what is going on and note which projects are successful when they propose new research funds and pass budgets. It is therefore of great importance for our research community within humanities to establish and intensify our tradition of collaborative Nordic projects.

If we broaden our horizon, we will note that our interest in Nordic collaboration may be seen as an effect of globalization, which means that contact with the global world makes us more aware of our own communities, and in this case our own languages. This is what the neologism *glocalization* refers to. Politically speaking, our research can improve the strategic position of our languages and make them less endangered.

2. What can we gain from Nordic collaboration?

The Nordic societies represent an ideal laboratory for research in many fields, especially linguistics and social sciences. Our societies are very similar with respect to social structure and social conditions, and they are organized in parallel institutions. We have rather different political histories, but in political terms we often say that all the Nordic countries became social-democratic

nations after World War II. This means that within the domains of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language, we can regard quite a lot of relevant aspects as resembling constants in a laboratory, and thus we can concentrate on the remaining variables.

This is the logic of 'micro-comparativism', a term used within the syntax project that is the topic of this meeting, and it can apply to social disciplines as well. It is a very good way of legitimizing our research and it has been underlined in our project outline of the year 2000.

The language communities included in the loanword project are the Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, Danish, Sweden-Swedish, Finland-Swedish and Finnish ones. As you easily understand, we cannot refer to those as the seven nations or the seven countries. They make up 6 nations, and 5 sovereign states. But we are dealing with seven language communities, a difference that is of interest in itself. Six of the languages are Nordic, but Finnish is not. Hence the very complex title of the project: "i språka i Norden" = in the languages of the Nordic countries. The phrase "In the Nordic languages" would be wrong. (I need to add that Greenlandic and Sámi are not included, both for the practical reason that there are too few competent native researchers, and because these communities are not characterised by the same focus on a threat from the English language.)

3. Language – structure and culture

Since this meeting is in structural linguistics, we should perhaps remind ourselves that language is both structure and culture. This should not be ignored. The project MIN is mainly a project about culture, because is about norms, standardization and attitudes. Our language communities vary quite a lot with respect to culture, and in 1989 a colleague of ours, Jørn Lund, introduced the term 'language climate' in an article presenting some hypotheses about the communities. Now we will be able to test these hypotheses. (However, we have included some structural aspects, too, as we shall soon see.)

4. MIN – a presentation

a. Goals

The intention of our project is on a very general level to study how seven Nordic language communities cope with language globalization. What is the actual impact of English on our languages, and how do people react to this influence in forming their attitudes? These aims of the project are expressed in this way in the project outline:

1. To make a comparative survey of the treatment of modern loanwords in the languages of the Nordic countries (regarding usage and norms), and
2. To gain general insight into the basis of language attitudes and specific insight into the attitudes towards loanwords in the Nordic countries ("the linguistic climate").

Again we can think in laboratory terms and assume that the language influence from abroad is the same for all the seven communities. What may be different is how each community reacts to the influence, what they do about it. These differences in accepting loanwords, in adaptation of loanwords, in attitudes and in standardization can be looked upon as effects of some other variables, e.g. political history, cultural focussing, language focussing and internal language conflicts.

b. The initiative

The background to the project is that the tensions between the global language, English, and the various mother tongues, i.e. "the languages of identity", have been felt over the last four decades. The national language councils have several times addressed the topic, for instance at their annual Nordic meetings. In 1998 the Nordic Language Council, asked me to outline a Nordic research project, and it financed two brainstorming sessions in Copenhagen with participants from all seven communities. This was the background for the project outline and the applications sent to the various Nordic funds.

As the initiative to the project came from the Nordic Language Council, it is natural that the project has a subsidiary aim as well:

3. to provide a background (through 1) and 2)) for the discussion and decision-making regarding aims and means in language planning and maintenance in the Nordic Language Council, and in the individual language councils of the Nordic countries.

c. Project design

Three main areas have been singled out: the situation with respect to usage of loanwords and substitute forms (neologisms), the situation with respect to official standardization norms, and the language users' attitudes towards loanwords and language. Measured in time and invested money, the last subproject is the most extensive one, and in this area little research has so far been carried out.

The structure or design of the project with its subprojects can be visualized in the following way:

A. The volume of loanwords in the Nordic languages

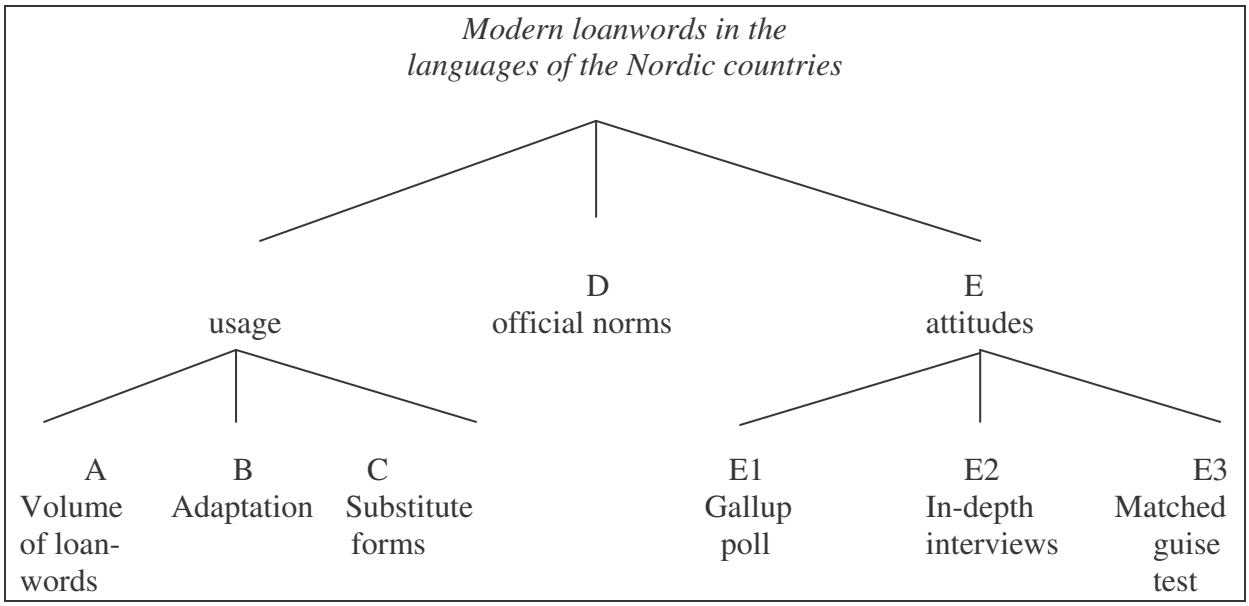
B. The adaptation of loanwords to the domestic languages
- B1. In writing
- B2. In speech

C. The frequency and usage of native substitute forms

D. National traditions regarding official standardization

E. Attitudes towards loanwords and substitute forms
- E1.Survey investigation
- E2. In-depth interviews
- E3. Matched guise-test

For those with strong preferences for trees the following figure should be useful!



Each of these sub-projects is carried through in each of the seven language communities. From a simple multiplication you will see that this makes up 56 sub-sub-projects. However, and fortunately, some sub-sub-projects have been carried out by one and the same person. The amount of work needed for each single project varies, a fact that is reflected in how they are organised. Most of them are relatively small and take some months for the individual researcher.

The E-projects in particular are bigger, and they are organized as doctoral projects or master's projects. Some of our collaborators are also taking part in ScanDiaSyn: Saija Tamminen and Leila Mattfolk are working on the attitude projects in Finnish and Finland-Swedish, and Jan-Ola Östman has been in charge of all the sub-projects in Finland. He succeeded Ann-Mari Ivars when she retired from her chair in Helsingfors. Ásta Svavarsdóttir is working on the two Icelandic B projects. So you see we are two overlapping families. Inge Lise Pedersen is a member of the project board.

The comparative aspect is a basic principle permeating all parts of the project, and will enable us to contrast the situation in the different countries in a way that has not been possible until now. We have therefore worked out a standard method for each sub-project and a relatively rigid structure has been imposed on the projects in each language community.

d. Finance

Collecting money is often the most difficult aspect of a project. The initiator, the Nordic Language Council, was not a research institution, but it financed sub-project A. Our first grant was given by the Norwegian research board for a doctoral scholarship in the Norwegian part of E2, afterwards NOS-H (Joint Committee of the Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities) granted a so-called part-financing amount for the rest of E2, which presupposed a complementary financing from national research and language boards. NordForsk (previously NorFa - Nordisk forskarutdanningsakademi) accepted us as a Nordic research network and financed our two meetings per year for a period of three years. E3 has been financed by Nordplus Språk and by the Nordic fund for culture. These are the large amounts and the main grants. In addition we have received many small grants from various national funds, applied for by our national members. All in all, this is a very complex and laborious method of finance.

And, let us not forget: The members of the network in university posts are not being paid, so their working hours are in fact financed by their universities. In sum, this represents quite a lot of money or investment.

d. Network meetings

Our project work started in the autumn term of the year 2000. Every November and May we have held a network meeting for all participants where we have discussed the theory and method of the sub-projects. Each meeting has had its own topic, and we have invited external speakers.

These meetings have been very important for the planning, and they have functioned as important milestones in the work schedule. And above all: they are essential for the social life of the project, where participants get to know each other both in a social programme and in discussions where they have the chance to elaborate ideas together. Especially for the young scholars, it is very important to realise that other colleagues have the same problems to worry about. One of our research groups, the one for in-depth-interviews, has had very fruitful discussions. The sessions were a meeting-point for representatives of different research traditions and different approaches to our discipline, and therefore very instructive and inspiring. Jan-Ola and I have rather different scholarly backgrounds, and our interests will of course leave an influence on our students at home. The students therefore deserve to encounter other views in order to broaden their horizons, and elderly scholars and supervisors need to have their ideas challenged.

The network meetings have been organized as both plenary sessions and as parallel group meetings. During the first meetings the most important topic was to find the most relevant theoretical framework for our approach to the problems and to design a method for collecting the data. All the groups worked out a detailed guide for the practical work in the various sub-projects and for the analysis in order to ensure that the results in all language communities could be compared.

A very interesting experience was that our meetings often followed the same pattern of group dynamics: During the afternoon the problems seemed to become more and more complicated as all possible objections were raised, and the participants often became frustrated. After such critical stages, we often felt pessimistic about the chances of designing a common basis for the subproject. However, in the morning new and fruitful ideas could be presented, and, of course, the mood was totally different. This oscillation from crisis to optimism is in my experience very fruitful when working on a problem, because of the intensive discussions and the participants' great involvement.

My advice is therefore to present and discuss all scholarly problems. Do not be afraid of tension.

5. Experience

a. Financing

You can of course imagine the many problems for a project leader. The very complex *financial situation* is a severe drawback for the work. On the one side,

the situation generates more administrative work, and, more important, it makes the research work itself less efficient. It is inefficient to let many academic people carry out relatively small projects on the basis of their private enthusiasms. With our aims given as presented before, it would have been cheaper for the research community or research funds to spend more money in a lump for a project carried out by fewer people on a full-time basis, i.e. by people paid for a year or some months. My conclusion is that we were too many people in our project.

On the other hand, if the political intention is to influence the scholarly discussion in as many universities and university colleges as possible, it is of course an advantage to involve many researchers.

b. Restrictions

The comparative aspect being an essential basis in our project, we were compelled to be very restrictive in the approaches used in the various sub-sub-projects, and the detailed guidelines were a methodological necessity. This meant that very many of the individual projects – even master and doctoral projects – did not have the individual or personal imprint that we are used to in our humanities tradition. The project outlines used in applications to the various research boards were to a high degree standardized. At the outset this caused some discussion of principles and scepticism, and raised the question: Should not our coming scholars have the chance to create their own projects and elaborate their own ideas?

For the E2 projects, which are mainly doctoral projects, we made a compromise by standardizing the data collection and letting the Ph.D. students make their own choices with respect to theoretical approach and focus.

My experience is that this scepticism of standardized approaches was exaggerated. Of course, the individual scholars lost some space for being intellectually creative. On the other hand, this focussing on systematic comparison of different communities offers a unique opportunity for methodological reflection. The advantage is that it is easier to realize that we are working in a laboratory, and that what we get out is in some way dependent on what we put in. This research situation gives rise to very many theoretical questions that represent intellectual challenges for the participants.

My conclusion is, therefore, that in the humanities we should be more open-minded about different ways of designing projects. Co-projects of our type are part of the methodological diversity that we should be striving for.

c. Internal dependency
When designing a project it is tempting to build a kind of logical progression between the sub-projects. In our case sub-project A should be a basic one. There we quantify the impact of loanwords on the actual language usage in newspapers. Sub-projects B1 and C should, in accordance with the initial plans, make the most of the results and data from A. This is a very vulnerable situation, because two sub-projects are dependent on another. What happened was that A turned out to be much more complicated than foreseen. It required complex organisation to obtain the right newspapers and the right local students to read and collect the data. Different people were to register in accordance with the same guidelines. And technically this should be carried through in collaboration with an expert on electronic databases and statistics at the University of Bergen. Because of the many persons involved, and the many stages dependent on each other, this project has been seriously delayed. Several times it halted for some months because we had to wait for the technical expert.

This greatly delayed the planning for the B and C projects. After more than a year we realised that those two sub-projects should be designed independently, without taking account of or being dependent on the data from the A project.

Interdependency – if we could use this term here – makes a project interesting theoretically, but vulnerable with regard to practical work.

A problem we did not foresee was the need for courses for specific purposes. In some subprojects it is necessary to do statistical work, and too late we realised that very few of our members were competent to do this at an advanced level. We should therefore have planned an intensive course for smaller groups both in statistics and phonology at an early stage.

d. Research schedule
The leader and the participants need deadlines in order to keep up the intended progress and to ensure that they have some results when the money is out and the research bodies demand a report. And the more the participants are dependent on each other, the more important become the deadlines. This implies a great deal of work for the leader, who has to be diplomatic when dealing with different personalities and individual situations.

This is a problematic area, and elderly scholars are busy and have a tendency to ignore deadlines, whereas young researchers are punctual and reliable. When

colleagues ignore the planned schedule, it causes a lot of frustration in the network.

The best deadlines are in fact the network meetings. An announced presentation at a meeting cannot be cancelled. Or more accurately: It is very difficult to escape these deadlines.

e. Many responsible persons
A project leader is not able to follow up all sub-projects and to be a supervisor for everyone in a large network. In MIN we have one responsible person for each of the eight sub-projects, and this person will also be the editor of the volume presenting the results and he or she will be the author of an article comparing the seven language communities involved.

f. The inspirational mood
I have now focussed on some problems. However, they should not dominate in our evaluation. The main thing is that Nordic networks and Nordic collaboration are very inspiring. All the participants are normally highly motivated, and the meetings are a kind of driving force both intellectually and socially. You can be sure that all present at this meeting will be very eager to meet the next time.

6. Results
Now you have been given what I have promised you, information about how we worked on the project on loanwords in the Nordic countries. You have not, however, heard anything about our results. They are and will be published. Three volumes are already published (on Novus forlag, Oslo), more volumes are due out during this year and next spring, among them also a concluding report.