

Patterns of communication in Sweden

SWEDEN is

*... great at watches, good cheese, have a lot of mountain peaks and the population speaks many foreign languages...

I am going to talk about

- patterns of communication
- Allwood's framework for the description of patterns of communication and some of the problems which are confronted if one wants to investigate culture dependent differences in communication (Allwood, 1982)
- Swedish culture and communication

What is "patterns of communication"?

- "patterns of communication": repeated traits of, or aspects of the communication of the members of a certain social or cultural group (Allwood, 1982)
- What is interesting? (many aspects and traits which are interesting). Not easy to choose!

Allwood's framework for the study of spoken language (Based on Allwood, 1982)

- **The study of the different activities in which a culture is manifested**
- **Purpose** (open and underlying, the nature of an activity and the communication within it, for example, to negotiate, to teach, etc.)
- **Roles, rights and obligations** (The expectations (and sometimes formal requirements) which exist concerning the rights, obligations and competence needs that are associated with a particular role in an activity (Allwood, 2007, p.11).
- **Overall structures and procedures**
 1. **Typical sequences of events** (routines for medical consultation, meetings, lectures)
 2. **Turntaking** (the distribution of the right to speak which is related to such phenomena as how long one can speak and if one can speak simultaneously with other speakers)
 3. **Feedback** (refers to the fact that speaker as well as listener, in a conversation must know how the other party is reacting).
 4. **Spatial arrangements** (can sometimes be conventionally determined as, for example, it is in a classroom or in a shop and can influence the communication)
 5. **Topics or what is talked about** (an sometimes be restrictions on what kind of content or topic is possible in a particular type of conversation)

The communicative behavior

- **a) Nonverbal behavior**
- **b) Phonological patterns**, i.e., the sounds which are used when one speaks.
- **c) Vocabulary**, i.e., the words and expressions which occur in different types of activities
- **d) Grammatical patterns**, i.e., differences in word order and types of linguistic construction which exist between different languages and between different ways of using a language.

Interpretation and understanding

- *“Understanding requires stored information in order for it to take place. A major part of this information consists of culture specific background information, i.e., beliefs which all persons in a particular cultural community share and take for granted. Since this information is presupposed in most conversations and precisely because it is taken for granted and appears self-evident, is not overtly expressed, it is likely that lack of insight concerning this type of information can be a basis for prejudice and misunderstandings between people from different cultures.” (Allwood, 1982)*

Problems connected with a description of culture dependent patterns of communication

- **Problem 1.** Which traits of communication are interesting and significant in a particular culture?
- **Problem 2.** How big is the variation in patterns of communication within a particular culture and what does it depend on? (e.g. occupation, age, gender, status, etc)
- **Problem 3.** Insufficient research

Speculations about Swedish patterns of communication

- **Is there anything unique?**
 - Nobel prize?
 - Midsummer, Lucia (in Finland as well?)
 - the consumption of alcohol at parties (own alcohol, wait for *skål*)
 - Purpose, roles** - less authoritarian teaching? no titles, informality

Typical sequences: Initial sequences

- eye contact
- greetings: whom and how? slight head nods, hej, "kram," even kissing (not often handkissing)
- introductions: all interactions of a social nature do not require that one introduces oneself in Sweden
- passing through doors

Typical sequences: Medial sequences

softening transition is common:

"du, jag vill tala med Dig om något" (you, I would like to talk to you about something)
"skulle jag kunna få tala med dig om något" (could I speak to you about something)
"det är något jag skulle vilja tala med Dig om" (there is something I would like to talk to you about)
"får jag fråga Dig något" (may I ask you something), or connected with an invitation "vad gör Du på lördag, etc" (what are you doing on Saturday, etc.).

In some circumstances- less in Sweden than, for example, in Anglo-Saxon or south European cultures (e.g. the dinner table. Swedish does not have a good word corresponding to the English word "please" or the German word "bitte". Constructions of the type "var god" (be good) "var vänlig" (be nice), are sometimes used, but the softening is more often indicated with modal verbs of the type "kan du" (can you), "skulle du kunna" (would you be able to), etc.

Phrases of the type "var så god, please" (be so good), have a much more restricted use and are mostly used initially when one wants, for example, to invite somebody to have some food.

cont.

- interruption
- feedback (nods and shakes of the head, small words like "mm" (mm), "ja" (yes), "umhm" + inhalation)
- turn-taking

* *Swedes use low tones in conversations, and pauses are often used and are not seen by listeners as an opportunity to "insert" a word. A silent person is seen as a reflective one. The Swedes do not like talking; "Do rather than speak!" is the motto of the majority of them.*

(Åke Daun It is rude to interrupt! Swedish Communication Style)

Typical sequences: Final sequencies

telephone calls: summarize the conversation ("vi säger sa" (we will say so), "vi säger det" (we will say that), or OK).

gratefulness: "thank you" is everywhere. "Ja tack då", "tack tack", "tack", "tack, tack", (Yes, thank you, thanks thanks, thanks, thanks thanks); "tack för maten" (thank you for the food), "tacka för senast" (thanking for the latest).

the Swedish intensive use of the feedback word *jaa* and saying *tack* ('thank you') are signs of "consensus making behavior." Being honest is also one of the traits of the Swedish character. Daun points out that

the desire not to lie stands counter to the desire to achieve mutual understanding. The opposition is dissolved through silence and the selective avoidance of sensitive subjects. What one says is true, honest, but need not be the whole truth.
(Daun, 1996, p. 98)

Spacial arrangements

- one tends to stand comparatively far away from each other without much bodily contact, in comparison to southern Europe, the Middle East or South America.

Topic of conversation

- taboos
- emotions
- gestures

Interpretation and understanding

- In Sweden a difference is often made between a person's private life and a person's public life
- "göra rätt för sig" (behaving correctly and doing one's full share) and not being a burden on others, especially economically
- calm, lack of aggressiveness and emotions, moderation, compromise, rationality, "lagom" (neither too much, nor too little), Jantelagen ("inte tro att man är någonting" (not beleieve one is something))

Women

- * The stereotype Swedish woman is beautiful, opinionated and speaks three languages. She has a strong aesthetic sense and her attitude to sex is accommodating. While single, she travels the world... Once married, she invariably has a career and keeps her own money...
- * (ur P. Berlin *Xenophobe's Guide to the Swedes*)

and men

- * The average Swedish man is seen as being shy, taciturn, submissive, sentimental, principled, reliable—precisely the sort of male companion the Swedish woman covets as the father of her children. He is Mr. Fixit who also knows how to push a pram and change a baby. He is basically a loner and is happiest at work, on the ski slope or at the country cottage which he is constantly rebuilding

Individualism and collectivism

- Hofstede assigns a relatively high score on individualism to Sweden, claiming it to be an individualistic culture, which is true but not the whole truth - a simplified and incomplete picture
- On one hand, Sweden **is** an individualistic country. However, Swedish individualism, in Hampden-Turner and Trompenaar's terms "has a very different quality" (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993, p. 235), compared to, for example, the United States.
- Swedish individualism is horizontal (i.e., an autonomous self is valued, but each individual is more or less equal in status to others); that contrasts to the vertical individualism, which emphasizes inequality and privilege, typical, for example, of the USA (Triandis, 1995).
 - Individualism in Swedish society is reflected in the common sayings *den gode mannen reder sig själv* ('a good man manages himself') and *du gör som du vill* ('do what you want to do'), which emphasize individual rights and autonomy.
 - Collectivism is reflected in national movements, participation in organizations that involve individuals with similar points of view and interests, and conformity, that is, not standing out (Daun, 2005).

Decision-making: consensus

- The Swedes see a decision as a solemn agreement between the participants at the meeting. Each person has the opportunity to make concessions, and a collective agreement on a decision, not one person's decision, is important.
- Lewis (2000) points to the similarities in the collectivistic form of Swedish and Japanese decision-making, where everyone has "ample opportunity to discuss projects thoroughly, since the right to debate and express one's opinion is paid for by strict adherence to the company policy once it has been settled" (p. 283).
- This also illustrates the collectivistic trend in Swedish society.

Facts and concrete information

- Swedes value facts and concrete information. The Swedes, as mentioned above, are representatives of monochronic and linear-active cultures in Hall's and Lewis's terms; logical argumentation, factualness, and matter-of-factness are common means of persuasion while the expression of emotions is rare (Daun, 1996; Herlitz, 2003).
- Punctuality should also be mentioned