

Axelsson, Carl-Axel, Per Jonason, Michael Knight & Kerstin Sundin. Bättre engelska. The English You Need and How to Use it. Stockholm: Norstedts Akademiska Förlag, 2008. 363 pp. ISBN 978-91-7227-502-7. Price: SEK 379.

The title of a book is not always descriptive of its content. This book's strangely bilingual title seems to indicate some kind of course in English proficiency, including communicative skills. However, the present reviewer is old enough to have been exposed to teaching based on *Engelsk vokabelsamling* by Carl Bergener, though not in its first (1931) edition, and recognizes the tradition of vocabularies for Swedish learners of English, represented for instance by booklets compiled by Johan Albert Drysén (1870) and Lotten Lagerstedt (1890) and by books written by Bergener (cf. above) and Martin Allwood (1964). The work under review is a de luxe version, expensive and with hard covers, including a colour picture of the traditional English gentleman, complete with bowler hat and umbrella, strolling in a traditional English garden. The four authors are senior citizens with distinguished publishing and teaching careers behind them.

The book consists of 30 subject areas for which English and Swedish words (in that order) are presented, plus a number of illustrative English sentences and short narratives. In general, the vocabulary is up-to-date, and although the general flavour is unmistakably British, some efforts have been made to include differences between British and American English vocabulary. The subject areas are well chosen for this day and age and include "Electronics", "Energy and the Environment", "The Universe and Exploring Space" and "War and Terrorism". Each chapter begins with a few quotations, from literature or other sources. Most of the quotations are to the point, but the suitability of Napoleon's contemptuous dictum "England is a nation of shopkeepers" as the first quotation under "Shopping and Eating Out" is debatable.

Sections within chapters are numbered in what looks like the hierarchical decimal system used in scientific articles and books. However, the system is used in a very unorthodox (or haphazard) way. The first chapter, Animals in the Nordic Countries, may serve as an example: 1. Mammals, 1.1 Small Animals, 1.2 Large Animals; 2. Wolves; 3. Parts of an Animal; 4. Reptiles and Amphibians; 5. Birds, 5.1 Small Birds, 5.2 Big Birds, 5.3 Water Birds; 6. Parts of a Bird; 7. Insects, 7.1 Bugs, 7.2 Flying insects; 8. Fish, 8.1 Saltwater Fish, 8.2 Freshwater Fish; 9. Shellfish; 10. Other Water Animals; 11. Farm Animals; 12. Pets; 13. Animal Sounds. Sometimes there is unnecessary structuring: (Chapter on Senses and Feelings) 2. Feelings and Emotions, 2.1 Feelings, 2.2 Emotions (which has two entries, *emotion* and *emotional*). (Section 3 is Happiness, which is thus neither a feeling nor an emotion.)

At the end of the book, there is a 48-page index comprising nearly 6,000 Swedish words, each followed by a reference to the page on which the English equivalent is to be found. It can thus, in a roundabout way, be used as a small Swedish-English dictionary, as suggested in the preface. However, the lists are

based mechanically on the translations given in the main part of the book, which means that *inte hinna*, *inte tåla* and *inte än* are entries, whereas *hinna*, *tåla* and *än* are not. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for *i gott skick* and *i hela kroppen*.

There are occasional words of warning concerning “false friends” or nouns that belong to different classes in English and Swedish. In general, however, grammatical aspects of the lexemes (such as (un)countability of nouns or irregularity of verbs) are not commented on, although there are a few exceptions. For instance, the principal parts of *rise* and *fall* are presented but not those of *win* and *lose* (and many others).

The target readership is not defined, except that it says in the preface that the readers are supposed to be fairly familiar with the English language. The directionality is not quite clear either: Although the book clearly has as one of its purposes to help Swedes to express things Swedish (“prinskorv”, “surströmming”) in English, it is sometimes the other way round, with things English (or American) explained. Trying to define typical users on an operational basis, i.e. what the authors think they need and do not need, I come up with the following, rather puzzling, picture. Readers are thought to need translations into Swedish (in the sample sentences) of e.g. *rare*, *remove*, *severe* and *tool*, which are all within the 2000 most frequent words in (written) English. On the other hand, they are supposed to be proficient enough to understand e.g. *cub*, *ignition* and *tribe*. They need to be informed that the main stress in *something* and *sorry* is on the first syllable (cf. below). On the other hand, they can do without help with the pronunciation of (*chest of*) *drawers*, *gauge*, *quay*, *receipt*, *scythe* and *thyme*. They are young enough to be interested in terminologies to do with computers and sports. On the other hand, they are old enough not to be put off by the outmoded gentleman on the cover of the book and to be apt to say “boiled veal with dill sauce” when asked to mention a typical Swedish dish. They are young enough to be interested in pick-up terminology but old enough to match the recommended (“the English you need and how to use it”, from the title, remember?) wording of the classic ending to a pick-up chat “*Shall we go to your place or mine?*” (reviewer’s emphasis). To sum up, the target readership is not well defined, which affects the quality of the book considerably.

In the preface, the authors suggest two different ways in which the book can be used: 1) As a Swedish-English dictionary, 2) For study area by area in order to attain improved specialized proficiency. For reasons to be detailed below, I have to note that the proficiency involved has very little to do with oral skills and the book can therefore hardly be used in preparation for an international conference or even for a tea-party. However, for the dying art of letter-writing or for e-mail communication it may serve a purpose.

The authors state in their preface that “no detailed information about pronunciation is given. However, help is often given by underlining of the vowel or the diphthong that carries the stress in polysyllabic words” (my translation; *diphthong* is used by the authors in the sense of *digraph*). For a language like English, this is clearly not enough, particularly since no distinction is made

between different pronunciations of a vowel letter or digraph. There is thus no difference in the marking between *hero* and *heroine*, *olive* and *onion* or *lily* and *lilac*.

In addition, it is easy to find some 50 cases where the underlining is unsatisfactory: needed but missing, present but unneeded, incorrectly placed or confusing as to its extension. Here follows a selection of the four categories. (Page numbers can be found via the Swedish index; however, one and the same word can be correct on one page and incorrect on another.) No stress is marked in e.g. *caravan*, *district*, *electronics*, *Lutheran*, *senior* (in all of which Swedish stress is on the last syllable in the same loanwords), *checkout*, *personnel*. In the following words, the stress mark is present and in the right place but unnecessary: *chicken*, *eider*, *fiction*, *gentle*, *living*, *orca*, *pity*, *something*, *sorry*, *tumble*, *tuna*; the word *webbed* is monosyllabic but the stress mark suggests two syllables. Examples of misplaced stress are *arcade*, *association*, *be online*, *built-in* (as a premodifier of *cupboard*), *cuckoo* (but correct in *cuckoo clock*), *disease*, *enrol*, *equipment*, *event*, *orientation*, *remand*, *sunbathe*, *transmitted*, *unconscious*. (The phrase *sexually transmitted disease* on p. 38 thus has a curious Finno-Ugrian ring to it.) The underlining is sometimes too long, systematically so in words like *guinea-pig* and *mosquito* (the sequence *ui* cannot be described as a digraph for the vowel sound); in such words, as is the case in *linesman* and *synod*, the long marking is annoying but not very serious, which, however, it is in *medieval*, causing the word to lose one syllable. In *squabble* the marking is both too long and unnecessary. The mark is too short in e.g. *joystick* and *nougat*. The variation between the short underlining in *payphone* and the long one in *payment* may cause confusion, reinforced by the fact that *payment* and *pay~~m~~ent* occur on one and the same page (206). No distinction is made between *review* and *relief*. In *horseradish*, the main stress is missing, and marking of secondary stress in *sundial* would have been welcome in order to avoid confusion with the pronunciation of words like *prandial* and *cordial*.

I sincerely hope that the infelicities identified as regards pronunciation are due to low-level clerical errors at the publishing-house rather than reflections of what has been taught by the authors to pupils and teacher trainees over a number of decades. The system of underlining the vowel with the stress is used by the Cobuild learner's dictionary, so any employees at the publishing-house, regardless of their personal proficiency in English, could have got it right by simply copying from that dictionary.

Sample sentences sometimes form contextual sequences, sometimes not, which may lead to confusing absurdities. "Adders are poisonous. In Sweden they are protected" exemplifies the former case; the latter can be exemplified by "This house is really too small for our family. My family comes from Finland" or "Grandma's apple pie tastes nice. She has excellent dress taste" or "The village was flooded after the cloudburst. Noah survived the Flood". There are other examples of confusing wording in the sample sentences, for instance "He was filled with admiration for his way of dealing with the problem".

Factual mistakes and infelicities range from incorrect Swedish (!) via incorrect translation equivalents to insufficient precision regarding words from the natural sciences. Sw. *brottmålsdomstol* > *brottmålsdomstol*; *galer* (as the present-tense form of the equivalent of Eng. *crow*) > *gal* in Standard Swedish; *segerpall* > *prispall* (for Eng. *rostrum*); Sw. *klämdag* is incorrectly defined as a working day taken off between two holidays, which is hardly ever true; *magisterexamen* is no longer quite correct for *master's degree*; *reavinstskatt* is no longer in technical use for *capital gains tax*; *stormarknad* is the equivalent of *hypermarket*, not of *supermarket*; *dull* as a colour term is not *tråkig* but *dämpad*, *glanslös*; it is not advisable for a Swedish *hemvärnsman* to try to pass himself off as a member of *The National Guard*; *passionkillers* (given as the only equivalent) is not the word to use for *mamelucker* when asking for them in a shop; *tandsten* is *tartar*, not *plaque*; *absolut majoritet* is a technical term, which *clear majority* is not; the sentence (under *Swedish Elections*) “A voter marks his ballot paper and puts it in the ballot box” does not describe behaviour typical of Swedish voting (besides, since 1921 women have voted too); “fairly large plains” are to be found south-east of Lake Vänern, not south-west; the links suggested between *bankautomat* and *cashpoint* on the one hand and between *ATM* and *bankomat®* on the other simply do not exist; *tunnland* may be the nearest equivalent to *acre*, but the difference is big enough for 9 *tunnland* to equal 11 acres, which merits a comment; the 12th, not the 11th century was the typical period for Norman noblemen to use French words for foodstuffs; *half one* in the day or night is not *halv ett* but *halv två*; *sädesslag* and *gryn* are indeed equivalents of *grain* and *cereal*, but not in that order; *scampi* is not *havskräfta* but *havskräftor*; *kryp* is no good as the only translation given of *insects*; a *tick* is not a bug but a spider; *Canterbury bell* is not *blåklocka* but *mariaklocka*; *pliers* as the only word for *tång* is misleading if the English words are supposed to help Swedes to communicate in real-life situations.

There are not many mistakes concerning the forms of English words, but *MI 5* and *MI 6* should be *MI5* and *MI6*, *cellotape* (under *Office equipment*, not under *Music*) should be *Sellotape®*, and *millenium*, though frequent, should definitely be *millennium* in a book with educational ambitions. Also for educational reasons, *parents council* should be *parents' council* and *EU* should be *the EU*. The subject–verb concord seems unorthodox in ... *more than one player plays at the same time*, and eyebrows may be raised at *Fox often suffer from scab*. The definite article is overused with the names of the seasons, e.g. *In the winter the fur turns white*. And, on the subject of articles, astronaut Neil Armstrong (p. 286) did use the indefinite article before *man*, according to an advanced analysis of the transmission from the moon, carried out and published in 2006.

There are a few inconsistencies, for instance (occurring close together) *anesthetic* – *anaesthetist*, *electric radiator* – *electrical radiator* (which is incorrect), *percent* – *per cent*, *millimeter* – *metre* (*per second*). Under “Years” in the section “Time and Measurement”, there is a puzzling statement (“vid jämna

hundratå” that seems to indicate a belief that the phrase *in the year* can only be used (or is the only one to use?) before even hundreds, which has no foundation.

To sum up, I am not completely averse to the idea of reviving the genre of vocabularies. They are, after all, one up on learning a language by reading a dictionary from cover to cover. What mystifies me is the very genesis of the work under review here. Had it not been for the coverage of fields of interest in today's world, the format could well have been mistaken for the result of an old manuscript having surfaced during the clearing of a desk. I doubt that Norstedts actually commissioned a book in the old vocabulary format, but at some point they must have accepted the manuscript for publication. From that point on, the quality of the product was their responsibility and I find it difficult to understand how Norstedts with their resources could let there be such a clash between form(at) and content. The money spent on the hard cover and the absurdly outdated colour picture on it could have been better spent on scrutiny and proof-reading by truly bilingual and bicultural expertise.

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