

From the editors

After two previous special issues, the present number of the journal appears without a common theme. Nevertheless, the issue contains a whole range of interesting articles and reviews. Not all can be mentioned here, although we would like to point to the following articles in particular.

The *English* section contains a very useful survey of Swedish-English language difficulties in connection with numerical expressions, written by Donald MacQueen of Uppsala. Marie Källkvist presents some new research findings relating to the importance of age when learning a foreign language. Readers of the journal are also ushered by Kelly Anspaugh into a rather intimate room in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the *German* section there are two articles on literary criticism. Ulla Niebergall provides a survey of Monika Maron's literary writing, while Bronny Skogström and André Skogström-Filser examine a work by Arno Schmidt from a text linguistic point of view. The *French* section contains among other things an article on one of the most renowned writers in French literature today, the Maugrabin author Tahar Ben Jelloun. Carmen Silva-Corvalán is one of the foremost names in sociolinguistic research into the Spanish language. Her contribution in the *Spanish* section examines the principal question of whether or not it is meaningful to speak about 'Latin American Spanish' as a particular variant of that language. The other main contribution, written by Juan Carlos Piñeyro, covers some of the many layers in the works of the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges.

In the new year there will be another change in the make-up of *Moderna Språk's* editorial board. The editors of the German section have expressed a desire to be replaced. Also among the editors of the Spanish section a change will take place. Because of his new duties within the university, Johan Falk does not feel he can continue his work on the board, of which he has been a member since 1990. We wish to take this opportunity to thank all of these colleagues for their excellent efforts in connection with *Moderna Språk* over the past few years. At the same time we would like to extend a warm welcome to the new members of the board, Martin Todtenhaupt, lecturer in German, and Ken Benson, professor of Spanish, both at the University of Göteborg.

DONALD S. MACQUEEN

A Sampler of Numerical Expressions in "Swenglish"

Donald MacQueen är amerikan och sedan många år verksam vid engelska institutionen i Uppsala. Bland hans publikationer kan nämnas *American Social Studies* (1991) och *Using Numbers in English* (1990). I den här artikeln diskuterar han ett urval svensk-engelska kontrastiva problem i samband med numeriska uttryck.

Introduction

Numerals are among the most uniform and universal symbols in the modern world. For this very reason, however, they are the source of a great deal of interference in cross cultural communication: people simply assume that the idiomatic trappings that are used to express universal numerical relationships are directly translatable into other languages. The linguistic casings of numerical expressions are in fact just as idiosyncratic and prone to misunderstanding as any other features of a language.

Most people are unaware that they use so many numerical expressions in their everyday language. Whenever it comes up that I wrote a book about English usage involving numerals, *Using Numbers in English, A Reference Guide for Swedish Speakers* (Studentlitteratur 1990), I find that people assume the volume consists of arcane discussions of formulas and algorithms, matter for engineers and technicians but certainly not for a general audience. I am far from qualified to make pronouncements about advanced mathematics, but I must be right in assuming that it is precisely at advanced levels that numbers are international and uniform; it is in the basics, in everyday expressions, that languages have developed their own usage florae. These differences pester mathematicians and lay people alike.

Point, comma or blank?

The devil is in these details. One tiny item that opens onto a vista of geopolitical controversy involves the punctuation of decimals. Most languages use a decimal comma (17,8 mm), while English uses a decimal point (17.8 mm). Up until a few years ago this was a simple matter for foreigners to adjust in their English: merely change the decimal commas to points and change the points between thousands, millions, etc. to commas in English.

But as of 1992 the International Standardization Organization (ISO) in Paris officially recommends that numbers be punctuated like this:

that is, with a blank space between the groups of three digits to the left of the decimal marker and with a comma as the decimal marker. Now, should someone using English as a foreign language (or for that matter should native speakers of English) follow the international standard above or should they use the traditional English form below?

(2) 2,896,488.57

The problem is that while you may feel that you are in the right when you follow the ISO, your readers, at least the native speakers of English among them, will think you are wrong. English has in fact paid little attention to the ISO recommendation, not solely because the ISO is headquartered in Paris, but because, owing to its unique position of influence in world communications, English does not have to. Some people may well find this smug attitude deplorable, but it is a fact of life at the end of the 20th century. My advice is that you wait until *Newsweek* and *The Economist* start using the ISO style before doing so yourself.

Billions and other big numbers

Fewer and fewer people are confused these days by the use of the word *billion* in English to denote a thousand million. Until the 1970s there was indeed a distinction between American and British usage here, the British supposedly using the term *milliard* instead. (I say “supposedly” because I have yet to encounter a Briton who ever used the expression personally.) For the last twenty or so years, however, British and American usage have both had *billion*, and *milliard* has been removed from modern British dictionaries (a move yet to be noticed by the “Big Three” American dictionaries, *Webster’s Third*, *Random House*, and *Heritage*). In international broadcasting, both the BBC and the Voice of America still favor the term *thousand million*, however, to avoid confusion.

The story behind this convergence of usage involves an international game of round robin. In the 18th century, when such standards began to take form in the wake of the scientific revolution, the young American nation followed the example of its champion, France, adopting that country’s system in which only three zeros were added to advance from *million* to *billion* to *trillion*, etc. In Britain and elsewhere on the Continent, the shifts required the addition of six zeros. In 1948, however, France decided to bring its usage into line with that of its European neighbors, only to have Britain switch to the American (originally French) system a few years later!

This convergence is only a wrinkle in British usage, however. After a *trillion*, which is often but not always the same as the American term, the traditional, continental six zeros still divide the really big numbers. Thus, *septendecillion*, for example, is 10^{54} (i.e., 1 followed by 54 zeros) in American usage and 10^{102} in British; *centillion*, the biggest number word (?) is

10^{303} and 10^{600} respectively. British English straddles two systems these days. Luckily, these latinized terms are virtually never used, so no harm is done.

Prepositions revisited

One of the hardest mistakes to avoid for Swedish speakers of English involves the idiomatic use of the preposition *för* to denote order of magnitude (*storleksordning*) as opposed to price. In Swedish you use almost identical expressions for both:

(3) *Vi köpte blommor för 550 kronor.*

(4) *Vi köpte blommorna för 550 kronor.*

In the first sentence we are expressing how much money we spent on flowers, in the second how much a known quantity of flowers cost us. The first sentence makes no sense in English:

(5) *We bought flowers for 550 crowns.

while the second is perfectly natural:

(6) We bought the flowers for 550 crowns.

Swedes often find it unsettling that only one of these nearly identical sentences is acceptable in English, disturbing almost to the point that they refuse to believe that there is a distinction between the two, that one is an idiomatic expression.

Nonetheless, sentence (3) above must be expressed differently in English:

(7) We bought 550 crowns’ worth of flowers.

(8) We bought flowers worth 550 crowns.

(9) We bought flowers to the value of 550 crowns.

(10) We spent 550 crowns on flowers.

Note the possessive apostrophe in (7) (this apostrophe, like many others in English, appears to be on its way out) and the definite article in (9). Swedish would have:

(11) *Vi köpte blommor till ett värde av 550 kronor.*

Million vs. millions

Another trap for Swedes and many other nationals involves plural endings on number words. In English from as recently as the 1920s you can find expressions like:

(12) *The entire county has three millions *of* inhabitants [*obsolete*].

This plural ending is in line with modern Swedish, French, German, etc., and the *of* is in line with Romance usage, but in modern English a specific number of millions has no preposition and the word *million* is in the singular:

(13) The entire county has three million inhabitants.

This change can perhaps be seen as a process of regularization: English adjectives, unlike those in Swedish, French, German, etc., do not generally have to agree with the nouns they modify, and *three million* functions as an adjective or noun determiner in this sentence. This is also true if the head noun (*inhabitants* above) is merely understood:

(14) The entire county has three million.

Swedes do not have any trouble with parallel cases involving *hundred* or *thousand*, no doubt because Swedish *hundra* and *tusen* take a zero plural.

In contexts where the number of hundreds, thousands, millions, billions is not specified, then the number word is itself a plural noun, separated from the head word by the preposition *of*, as in the now obsolete usage in (12) above:

(15) The entire county has millions of inhabitants.

Swedish interference is compounded if dollars are involved. Phrases like:

(16) *fyra miljoner dollar*

often come out in English as:

(17) *four millions dollar

instead of:

(18) four million dollars

At first glance it might appear that the “s” has perversely jumped from the adjective to the noun, but in fact these are probably two separate instances of interference. The first has been discussed above, and the second, the “s”-less *dollar*, is no doubt an echo of the zero plural in Swedish. Whatever its cause, this construction is one of the most predictable mistakes made by Swedes.

A related expression that makes Swedes think twice is the attributive compound adjective:

(19) It was a five-day-old infant.

In the predicate, of course, the hyphens disappear and the plural ending surfaces:

(20) The infant was five days old.

Swedish has the same plural form for the attribute and for the predicate complement.

Singular in Swedish, plural in English

What is meant by plural is not merely a mathematical question. Almost invariably a Swede speaking English will say that s/he lived abroad for:

(21) *one and a half year

It may simply be that it is the zero plural of *år* that lies behind this particularly common instance, but I believe two other factors are at work. In Swedish “plural” seems to mean “two or more,” while in English it means “more than one.” This leaves an infinite gray zone of values between one and two. The other factor is that, no matter how plural the noun is, the Swedish ear tends to use a singular form if the quantity ends with a common fraction:

(22) *sju och en halv minut*

(23) *åtta tusen nio hundra trettiofyra och fem åttondels banan*

Even though Swedes often do add a plural ending in phrases like these, it seems as if the fraction and the head noun tend to form a singular unit in Swedish. This would be virtually out of the question in English.

The English ear has the reverse problem with decimal fractions below one. Half a liter is clearly not a plural quantity but, written as *.5 l*, it will most often be read aloud as “point five liters.” Written in full, the unit should nonetheless be written as *.5 liter*, with no *s*. (The leading zero—*0.5*—is used in English, but much less commonly than in Swedish.)

Can both be more than two?

There is one “Swenglish” problem that I feel more and more is actually an English deficiency; Swedish is developing a new function word and leaving English behind, so to speak. Over the last few decades Swedish has come to accept the use of *både...och* (*both...and*) with reference to a series of three

or even more items. Indeed, it has become almost expected that *både* will introduce a string of more than two categories (although I find that Swedes are often reluctant to admit that this is the case):

(24) *både män, kvinnor och barn*

At the same time, no one would think of saying **båda tre*, with the dual and plural immediately juxtaposed. This extension of the dual marker is nevertheless a handy inclusive parallel to *endera (varken, vare sig)...eller...eller*, which corresponds to English *(n)either...(n)or...(n)or*, both of which expressions can introduce any number of categories.

The purpose of the new *både* is thus to signal that several categories are to follow, no longer just two. (Swedish also has the construction *såväl...som* for this purpose, but it is felt to be too formal for relaxed usage). Unfortunately English still uses *both* before two items only, and Swedes invite both smiles, giggles, and guffaws when they try to transfer their convenient usage to English.

English could very well use a new inclusive plural bracketer to anticipate lists of three or more. *All* seems a likely candidate at first glance, since it works *after* a list of items, but prepositively it is already fully occupied, of course, signaling complete categories: *all men, women, and children* denotes *all men, all women, all children*. Any suggestions for a new word in English?

When is "half six?"

People in the British Isles use a numerical expression that is virtually unknown in North America and Australia. They say *half six* for 6:30 (A.M. or P.M.). This is short for *half past six*. Three decades ago this usage was limited to the northern parts of the Isles, but it has now spread to the rest of the U.K. and Eire. It is odd that it has not made its way into American, Canadian, or Australian usage. Needless to say, it can lead to misunderstandings between British speakers and Swedes or Germans, who use *halv sju* and *halb sieben* respectively for the same time of day.

English has a numerical expression that Swedish lacks:

(25) This year we've earned *half again as much* as last year. (American)

(26) This year we've earned *half as much again* as last year. (British)

This means "fifty percent more" than last year. The difference in word order in this phrase is firmer than many other distinctions between American and British usage. Swedish, to be fair, has a similar expression that English lacks (although young Swedes are often not familiar with it):

(27) *Vi var där halvannan timme.*

(28) We were there for an hour and a half (literally, *half another hour*).

Both expressions involve a factor of 150 percent, but the application is different.

Can you do percentages?

Questions involving percentage represent another area where Swedes sometimes find it hard to believe that they cannot simply use their Swedish expressions in English. A literal translation of the following is impossible, however:

(29) *Hur många procent av bilarna är redan sålda?*

(30) *How many percent of the cars have already been sold?

One of the corresponding English expressions is so odd that I can see why foreigners might wonder about it:

(31) How great a percentage of the cars have already been sold?

(32) What percent(age) of the cars have already been sold?

The strange word order in (31) is akin to *too big a house* and *such a problem*, expressions that sound ridiculous when translated into Swedish word for word.

Final remarks

The above is just a sampler of numerical and related expressions. There are scores of English constructions that differ from their Swedish counterparts and a dozen or two distinctions between American and British usage. Despite these facts and despite the ubiquity of such expressions in any language, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to the field. I am currently working on an expanded international edition of my own book, introducing examples that contrast with many other languages. There is, in fact, a grammar of numbers that is not in the realm of mathematics.