

Is “den förste att gå” den förste som gick?

MAGNUS LJUNG

1. Aim and background

Like all other European languages - and a good many others - Swedish has been exposed to the linguistic influence of English for a long time. The first wave of loanwords reached Swedish as early as the 17th century, bringing a trickle of different loans, such as *dogg* [dog], *tobak* [tobacco], *puritan* and *kväkare* [Quaker]¹. The following centuries saw an accelerating influx of English loans, most of them linked to the introduction of new goods and techniques, for example words denoting new means of transportation such as *skonare* [schooner], *kutter* [cutter], *brigg* [brig], terms for new types of food like *potatis* [potatoes], *rostbiff* [roast beef] and *käx* [cakes], for new trends in fashion, for instance *schal* [shawl], *keps* [cap], *väst* [waistcoat], and new developments in sports, among them *finish*, *hockey*, *match*. By the end of the 19th century, the trickle of loans had developed into a steady stream, prompting the early 20th century linguist Nils Bergsten to remark - in 1915 - that “Som ett allmänt intryck kan fastslås att det engelska inflytandet sannolikt ännu ej på länge nått sin kulmen” [It may be stated as a general impression that, in all probability, the English influence will not have reached its peak for a long time yet²]. (Bergsten 1915). Today, when the process that started as a trickle has developed into a virtual torrent, it is easy to see that his remark was highly prophetic.

As the above examples indicate, some of the loans were adapted to Swedish spelling and pronunciation, while others were taken over more or less wholesale from English. What they all have in common is the fact that they are direct loans, i.e. they are all instances of lexical borrowing from the foreign language.

¹ My account of the English loans here is based on Chrystal (1980) and (1988).

Most studies of borrowing - especially those taking a historical perspective - focus on direct loans. This emphasis on direct lexical borrowing is understandable from several points of view, not least because such loans are highly visible and offer incontrovertible evidence of their foreign extraction. Not all foreign linguistic influence is direct, however: studies of linguistic borrowing have long recognised the existence of *translation loans* (also known as "calques"), which usually involve literal translation of compounds and phrases in the foreign language, and *semantic loans* in which the meaning of a native word is extended in accordance with usage in the donor language, as when Swedish *köpa* [buy] can also be used in a phrase like *köpa ett argument* [buy an argument].

Unlike what is the case with direct loans, the evidence for the loan status of calques and semantic loans is always inferential and dependent on the interpreter's knowledge of the donor language. When for example a Swedish journalist recently wrote (about golf star Annika Sörenstam) "Om Annika spelar bra öppnar hon en burk med mask" (Expressen May 22, 2003, p. 4), there is a strong likelihood that he was translating² the American English expression *open a can of worms* ("create a complex and difficult problem") literally into Swedish *öppna en burk mask*, an expression that must have struck many readers as extremely odd.

However, a strong likelihood that something is a loan is not the same as evidence that it is, and it is obvious that in (purported) semantic loans and calques, the link between the Swedish expression and its alleged foreign original is much more tenuous than in the case of direct loans.

That link is even more tenuous in another category of loans, i.e. the category known as *construction loans* or *structural loans*. In these, a syntactic or morphological pattern traditionally used to express a certain meaning in the borrowing language is assumed to have been replaced by the pattern preferred by the donor language. In a Swedish construction like *Den största svenska segern någonsin* [the greatest Swedish victory ever], for example, the placement of *någonsin* represents a fairly recent development in the language, a development, furthermore, that is arguably an instance of construction or structural borrowing from English.

But structural borrowing may also involve what has been called "the preferred way of saying things"³, i.e. the default choice of realisation of a

² The journalist may also simply have been using a direct translation already established in journalistic jargon.

³ To my knowledge, this expression was first used by Graeme Kennedy in Kennedy (1992).

linguistic variable. The aim of the present paper is to examine a Swedish construction in which English seems to have affected Swedish usage in such a variable. The variable in question is the choice between *att*-infinitives and finite relative clauses with *som* [who/that] as postmodifiers in NPs involving one of the ordinals *första/förste* [first]. Traditionally the preferred – and indeed the only recognised – postmodifier in such NPs has been and still is a finite relative clause introduced by *som*, as in (1) and (2).⁴

1. Engelsmannen Adrian Moorhouse blev den första som satte
Europarekord i Strasbourg.
[The Englishman Adrian M. was the first who set a European record
in Strasbourg]
2. Hon blev den första svenska ryttarinnan som vann en tävling ...
[She became the first Swedish woman rider who won a competition]

However, there appears to be a fairly widespread feeling among native Swedish speakers that in recent Swedish usage the relative clause postmodifier in constructions like (1) and (2) is increasingly being replaced by postmodifiers using infinitival *att*-constructions as in (3) and (4).

3. Engelsmannen Adrian Morrhouse blev den första att sätta
Europarekord i Strasbourg.
[The Englishman Adrian M. was the first to set a European record in
Strasbourg] (DN87).
4. Hon blev den första svenska ryttarinnan att vinna en tävling ... (DN87)
[She became the first Swedish woman rider to win a competition]

Many speakers of Swedish deplore this development and feel that the use of NPs with infinitival postmodifiers in sentences like (3) and (4) goes against the norms of Swedish, and that a better way of expressing the meanings of these sentences would be to use NPs postmodified by finite relative clauses as in (1) and (2).⁵

Against this background, the aim of the present paper can now be made more precise: it is to test the hypothesis that the relative clause postmodifiers in sentences like (1) and (2) are increasingly being replaced by *att*-infinitives as in (3) and (4). However, before we address this

⁴ The new Academy grammar of Swedish (Teleman et al 1999) does not seem to comment on the *att-som* choice.

⁵ So far as I know, the only Swedish linguist to have written about this development is C.Grünbaum in Grünbaum (2003).

question, it should be pointed out that this suspected ongoing change in Swedish affects not only constructions with *förstaförste*, but in fact all postmodified NPs in which the head is premodified by a superlative or an ordinal, as for instance in the recently attested examples (5) and (6):

5. Den viktigaste vetenskapsdelegationen att besöka Japan på 30 år.
[The most important scientific delegation to visit Japan in 30 years]
(*Universitetsläraren* 17, Dec.17, 2003, p. 1)
6. Han är den 400:e amerikanska soldaten att dö i Irak
[He is the 400th American soldier to die in Iraq]
(The Swedish news program *Aktuellt* at 2100 hrs, 2003-11-15)

For practical reasons, however, the present study is concerned only with constructions involving infinitivally postmodified NPs beginning with one of the combinations *den förste*, *den första*, *de första*, *det första*, either on their own or followed by one or several nouns serving as head(s) of the phrase. In the remainder of the paper I will refer to such NPs as "*försteförsta-NPs*".

2. The English model

In order for construction borrowing to take place, there has to be a foreign construction serving as a model for the change suspected to be going on in the receiving language. In the case of the postmodifying Swedish *att*-constructions, we don't have to look far afield to find the construction cast as the villain of the piece: it is obviously the class of English complex NPs with postmodifying *to*-infinitive clauses in which the antecedent corresponds to the subject of the infinitive, a construction described in e.g. Quirk et al 1985, § 17.32 (and much more fully in Kjellmer 1975) and exemplified in Quirk et al as (7):

7. They were the last guests to arrive. ["They were the last guests who arrived."]⁶

As both Quirk et al and Kjellmer note, the postmodifying *to*-infinitives in such NPs correspond to and may be paraphrased as finite relative clauses; Kjellmer suggests that they be called "relative infinitives", a usage that will

⁶ Although Quirk et.al. use an example with *last*, they point out that this category also comprises 'adjectives in the superlative degree, general ordinals ... *first* or other ordinal numerals.'

be adopted here. Formally, the NPs involved in such constructions may be divided into two subcategories. In one of these, *first* itself serves as the head of the NP – for example in (8). In the other, *first* is the adjectival modifier of the head of the NP, as in (9) below:

8. Harold Wilson was *the first* to reply – by return post. (BNC A03 997)
9. I cherished the ambition to be *the first (perhaps the only) Italian writer* to describe the Yiddish world (BNC A05 1451).

In the rest of this paper I will refer to NPs like that in (8) as “simple *first*-NPs” and to those like that in (9) as “complex *first*-NPs”.

The relative force of the *to*-constructions in (8) and (9) is easily verified: in both, the infinitives may be replaced by the relative clauses *who replied* and *who described*. However, as most grammars intended for teaching point out, the infinitival construction is clearly the preferred one: in the entire 90 million words making up the written part of the BNC, there are 1,349 *the first to* constructions, but only 5 *the first who* and 36 *the first that* constructions. This means that the three constructions occur, respectively, 0.05, 0.41 and 15.46 times per 1 million words.

Semantically, the sentences with infinitive postmodifiers and those with relative clause postmodifiers are identical – both describe the order in which things take place: if Harold Wilson is described as *the first person to reply*, then, of all the people who replied (to whatever summons), Harold Wilson was literally the first. If he had only been number three among the repliers, he would have been described as *the third person to reply*, had he been number 15 he would be *the fifteenth to reply*, etc.

However, not all NPs with *to*-infinitival postmodifiers are relative and order-describing. In (10) - (12), for example, the *to*-infinitive cannot be replaced by a relative clause.

10. I am the first to admit that it is not that easy.
(BNC CJC 18)
11. I am the first person to admit that success is not that frequent.
(BNC FR9 194)
12. The convent wanted to sell part of the grounds for development: the local council was sympathetic, while being the first to recognize the importance of the garden
(BNC AR9 1009)

Clearly in (10) and (11) *the first (person) to admit* is not the *first (person) who admits*, but has an almost performative⁷ character: these sentences mean something like "I express my extreme willingness to admit that...". It is more difficult to fall back on a performative interpretation for third person NPs like *the local council*, but it is still the case that replacing the infinitive with a relative clause would distort the meaning of the sentence. None of the non-relative constructions are about the order in which admitting and recognising takes place. Their meaning is perhaps best characterised as "attitudinal" since their function seems to be to describe a positive attitude or tendency towards the state, feeling or even action denoted by the infinitive.

We can sum up the presentation of the English *first*-constructions discussed above as in the following figure:

	English <i>first</i> -constructions	
Relative		Non-relative
meaning		(attitudinal) meaning
<i>to</i> -infinitive	rel.clause	<i>to</i> -infinitive
preferred	non-preferred	only realisation
realisation	Realisation	

Fig. 1 English *first*-constructions

3. The Swedish postmodifying att-som variable

As we saw in the preceding section, there is a stylistic alternative to English relative infinitive constructions like e.g. *Harold Wilson was the first to reply*, i.e. constructions using a finite relative clause like *Harold Wilson was the first who replied*. The second type was shown to be rare, but since the possibility of variation exists, postmodification in English *first*-NPs must be described as a *variable* – the *to-who* variable – with two possible realizations: the *to*-infinitive – which is overwhelmingly the most frequent

⁷ I owe this suggestion to Peter Alberg-Jensen of the Slavic department at Stockholm university.

choice – and the finite relative clause. It was also found that the relative *to*-infinitive has a non-relative homonymous construction with what was called “attitudinal” meaning.

The same description fits the facts of Swedish: the language has what we may call an *att-som* variable, i.e. relative postmodification of *försteförsta*-NPs may be realised as either an *att*-infinitive or a finite relative clause in *som*, as shown in examples (1) to (4) in section 1. However, the two languages differ in their choice of preferred realisation of the variable: in Swedish, the preferred realisation of the variable is the relative clause construction with *som* rather than the alternative realisation with an *att*-infinitive.

The two languages are also alike in that the Swedish *att*-infinitive sometimes used to realise the *att-som* variable has a homonymous “double” which is not relative at all, but expresses “attitudinal” meaning. Before going into detail about this I will briefly describe how the *att-som* variable was defined and how instances of it in the data were identified.

The first step was to make a preliminary list of all instances of the *att-som* variable used as postmodifiers in *försteförsta*-NPs in a number of Swedish text corpora from different points in time (the data used will be presented in the following section). The variable was defined as the sum of all cases of *försteförsta*-NP postmodifiers consisting of either a relative *att*-infinitive or a *som* + relative clause construction in which the relative pronoun is the subject of the relative clause.

The second step of the investigation was to verify the variable status of each example, i.e. to determine in how many cases the constructions were really interchangeable without loss of meaning. Once that has been done, all that remained to do was to calculate the respective proportions of *att*-constructions and *som*-constructions in order to obtain a measure of the popularity of each of the two realisations.

In the majority of cases the verification process created no problems. Thus, to offer two examples, it is clear that (13) and (15) can be successfully reformulated as (14) and (16) respectively.

13. Bli den förste i Ert kvarter att äga sista skriket i Popkonsten!. (Press 65)
[“Become the first on your block to own the latest in pop art”]
14. Bli den förste i Ert kvarter som äger sista skriket i Popkonsten!
15. Alice och hennes man var de första att bygga i kvarteret. (GP 03)
[Alice and her husband were the first to build a house in their area’]

16. Alice och hennes man var de första som byggde i kvarteret

However, in certain cases the interchangeability of *att* and *som* is more difficult to establish. It clearly co-varies with other characteristics of the text, such as the complexity of the predicate in the infinitive/relative clause: thus, for example, the choice of *att*+infinitive rather than *som*+relative clause appears to be somewhat less likely when the predicate contains an auxiliary, in particular if the auxiliary is a modal. There are also differences among the individual modals here: as the examples (17) – (20) indicate, relative clauses with *kunna* can be readily converted to *att*-infinitives, but for relative clauses with *böra* this is impossible.

17. Hon är den första som kan säga detta

[She is the first who can say that]

18. Hon är den första att kunna säga detta

[She is the first to be able to say that (literally *She is the first to can say that)]

19. Hon är den första som bör känna till detta

[She is the first person who ought to know that]

20. *Hon är den första att böra känna till detta

[*She is the first person to ought to know that]

The discussion above focused on difficulties that came up in decisions about the replacing of *som*-constructions by *att*-constructions. As a rule, there are no problems in replacements going in the opposite direction, i.e. *att*-infinitives can usually be freely converted into *som*-constructions. However, just as in English there is one noticeable exception to this, viz. the non-relative – “attitudinal” - infinitives. The Swedish constructions of this kind are identical to the English ones in most respects, compare for instance (21) - (22).

21. Tyvärr är jag själv den första att betvivla detta. (Press 65)

[Sadly, I am the first person to doubt that]

22. Att städarbetet ändå tycks ha klickat ibland är han den förste att erkänna. (DN 1987)

[That the cleaning still sometimes appears to have been neglected, he is the first to admit]

In the course of what I have called the verification process, sentences like (21) and (22) were identified and excluded from the investigation. Spotting such non-relative *att*-constructions is in most instances easy, since they usually contain predicates with “attitudinal” meanings, for example

erkänna [admit, acknowledge, recognise], *beklaga* [regret, deplore], etc. However, sometimes a wider choice of predicates is available, as in (23)⁸:

23. Han var den förste att rycka ut till hennes undsättning.
[He was the first to come to her rescue].

Sentences like (23) are problematic, since they can be given both a relative and a non-relative (“attitudinal”) interpretation, meaning either “He was the first person who came to her rescue” or “He was always willing to come to her rescue (every time she needed it)”. On the first reading, (23) describes a fact, but on the second it describes an attitude or a characteristic attributed to the subject. In Grünbaum (2003), the author argues that *förste-* (and *siste-*) NPs with postmodifying *att*-infinitives like *den förste att rycka ut till hennes undsättning* have traditionally only been used with non-relative – what I have called “attitudinal” – meaning and insists that in the interests of linguistic clarity they should stay that way. Like many others she feels that there has been an unfortunate increase in the relative use of such NPs in Swedish, and that this is due to the influence from English, a language that admittedly uses the same infinitival construction to express both relative and non-relative meaning.

4. Data and results

It is now high time to address the question asked at the beginning of the paper, i.e. the question whether there is reason to believe that there has been an increase in the use of relative infinitive constructions in Swedish in recent years.

In order to do that we have to find a number of comparable Swedish texts strung out along the time axis in a reasonably regular manner and compare them with regard to their use of *förstalförste* constructions. Such a comparison is now possible thanks to the efforts of *Språkdata* at the University of Göteborg, an organization that has assembled a number of Swedish text corpora from different points in time and made them available on the Internet.

From among the texts available, I chose the following newspaper corpora as the data on which to base my study: Press 65, Press 76, DN 87, Press 98 and GP 03. The first two of these are made up of texts from various Swedish newspapers from the years 1965 and 1976, respectively. DN 87 consists of articles appearing in Sweden’s biggest daily *Dagens*

⁸ This example is from Grünbaum 2003

Nyheter in 1987, Press 98 contains texts from different Swedish dailies published in 1998, and GP 03 contains the full contents of the Göteborg daily *GöteborgsPosten* from the first six months of 2003.

The main advantage of the above choice of corpora is their positions along the time axis. Press 65 and GP 03 represent the beginning and the end, respectively, of the full time range covered by the *Språkdata* newspaper corpora. As a result of this, the selection of texts decided on here makes it possible to compare texts over a time span of almost 40 years. In addition, the time intervals separating the first four corpora are of exactly the same length, i.e. 11 years. For the final corpus – GP03 – it was obviously no longer possible to maintain this regularity.

However, the above advantages were bought at a price. The price in this case involved the size of the corpora, which varies considerably as Table 1 indicates:

Table 1: The size of the Swedish newspaper corpora.

Corpus	Number of words
Press 65	990,989
Press 76	1,156,958
DN 1987	4,132,784
Press 98	9,239,336
GP 03	8,000,000
Total	23,520,067

While such huge differences in corpus size are obviously deplorable, they do not so far as I can see, invalidate the results of the comparison, since what will be compared is not absolute but relative frequencies. Thus what we will be comparing is the different realisations of the relative *att-som* variable, i.e. the choice between *att* and *som* constructions in relative postmodifiers in NPs of the *försteförsta* type, in cases where both constructions are deemed to be possible.

Let us now turn to the results of the comparison. Table 2 presents the frequencies of occurrence for the relative *att* and *som* constructions in the five newspaper corpora (the non-relative *att*-constructions have been omitted). The column for the *att*-constructions also contains percentage figures revealing the proportion of the *att-som* variable represented by the relative *att*-constructions.

Table 2: The distribution of postmodifying relative *att* and *som*-constructions in five Swedish newspaper corpora

Corpus	Relative <i>att</i> -constructions	Relative <i>som</i> - constructions	Totals
Press 65	5 (10.8%)	41	46
Press 76	1 (5%)	19	20
DN 87	14 (12.5%)	98	112
Press 98	26 (15.7%)	140	166
GP 03	25 (17.6%)	117	142
Totals	71 (14.6%)	415	486

What is perhaps most noticeable about the results in Table 2 is how few realisations of the *att-som* variable there are in a total corpus of 23.5 million words. Overall, there are 486 realisations of the variable, which works out at 20.7 realisations per one million words. There are almost exactly three relative *att*-NPs per 1 million words and roughly 17.7 instances of the relative *som*-construction in the same amount of words.

Regarding the question whether there has been an increase in the use of relative *att*-infinitives, it does look as if the use of *att* has been gaining ground at the expense of *som* but only moderately so. Thus with one exception – Press 76 – the proportion of *att*-realisations calculated as a percentage of the total number of realisations has gone up from 10.8% in 1965 to 17.6% in GP03. It must be admitted, however, that the actual number of occurrences is low and that the total picture that emerges can hardly be said to support the view that there has been an explosive increase in the use of relative *att*-infinitives. In addition, a chi square test of the figures in Table 2 reveals that the differences are not statistically significant at the .05 level.

In fact, if we relate the number of occurrences to the size of the corpora involved, it looks as if there has been a decrease in the use of the entire *att-som* variable, i.e. the use of NPs of the type *den förste som/att*, *de första som/att*, etc. has actually gone down in the period 1965 to 2003. The total number of *att-som* realisations in Press 65 was 46. If the ratio between number of instances and corpus size had remained constant, the total number of realisations in Press 98 should have been 9.32 times higher, i.e. roughly 429, since Press 98 is 9.32 times larger than Press 65 ($9,239,336 / 990,989 = 9,323$). In order to reach that value, the reported value for Press 98 would have to be multiplied by a factor of 2.6.

The same point can also be made in yet another way i.e. by comparing the number of occurrences per 1 million words across the corpora. This has been done in Table 3.

Table 3: Occurrences of relative *att* and *som* per 1 million words in the five newspaper corpora

	Relative att	Relative som
Press 65	5.05	41.4
Press 76	0.9	16.4
DN 1987	3.4	23.7
Press 98	2.8	15.2
GP 03	3.1	14.6

It is probably wise to take the results in Table 3 with a pinch of salt, since in this type of comparison, the small size of Press 65 and Press 76 will tend to skew the outcome of the comparison. However, these results provide a certain amount of further support for the idea that the *att*-constructions have been gaining ground at the expense of the *som*-constructions: counting from DN 87 downwards we notice a decline in the *som* figures, while the *att* figures remain more or less stable.

5. Last words

The aim of the research on which the present paper is based was to find out whether there has been an increase in the use of the relative *att*-construction in Swedish NPs premodified by *första* or *förste* like for example *Hon blev den första (svenska författaren) att motta priset*. The results of the analysis indicated that there appears to have been a certain increase in the use of relative *att* in the almost 40 years that have passed since 1965, the date of the earliest newspaper corpus available.

That there has been an increase would have been even clearer if we had concentrated on the "simple" type of *första/förste*-NP i.e. those NPs in which *första/förste* is itself the head of the noun-phrase. This becomes apparent from a study of the results in Table 4, which breaks down the results into separate columns for the simple and the complex NPs.

Table 4: Simple vs. complex *att/som*-NPs

Corpus	Simple NP att	Simple NP som	Compl NP att	Compl NP som
Press 65	3 (15%)	17/20	2 (7.7%)	24/26
Press 76	1 (11%)	8/9	0 (0%)	11/11
DN 87	8 (17 %)	37/45	6 (9%)	61/67
Press 98	21 (26.2%)	59/80	5 (5.8%)	81/86
GP 03	12 (22%)	42/54	13 (14.7%)	75/88

Clearly it is the simple type of *förstaförste*-NP that is primarily gaining ground at the expense of the *som*-construction. But for all this, there remains a feeling that there is just too little data for us to draw any firm conclusions. It has to be said that it is somewhat disappointing to find such scarcity of examples in what must be regarded as a fairly substantial collection of data. Furthermore this very scarcity of relevant examples calls into question the often reported impression among native speakers that these days, Swedish is positively teeming with relative *att*-constructions.

One possible explanation for the apparent scarcity of data may of course be that the newspaper corpora used here are simply not representative and that picking another batch of newspaper corpora would yield different and more definitive results. Such an explanation may well be correct. However, there is also another explanation that suggests itself, i.e. that for all reports to the contrary, a rate of occurrence of about 3 times per 1 million words is in fact reasonable for such a construction.

On such a view, the perceived ubiquity claimed for the relative *att*-constructions by many native speakers of Swedish would have to be explained in terms of the *salience* of these constructions: it may be that a rate of occurrence of 3 per 1 million words is enough to make the relative *att*-constructions *seem* to be all over the place.

At the same time, there can be no doubt of the presence of the relative *att*-construction in present-day Swedish. Thus a Google search of the Internet for the phrases *den första att*, *den förste att*, *de första att* and *det första att* yielded the following results⁹:

⁹ I wish to thank Sölve Ohlander from Göteborg university for suggesting such a search.

Table 5: Results of a Google search for *förstaförste* NPs

Den första att	ca 1500
Den förste att	ca 1410
De första att	ca 1860
Det första att	ca 200

Obviously these figures are approximations and there are many possible sources of error in this kind of search.¹⁰ Thus, to mention just one of these, these reported figures clearly also include all instances of non-relative *att*-constructions like *Jag är den förste att erkänna att...* which would have to be dropped from the data. But even if the figures in Table 5 should perhaps be reduced by some 25%, the results of the Google search are highly convincing and suggest that by now the relative *att*-construction has carved out a place for itself in the Swedish language.

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¹⁰ In addition, no attempt has been made to ascertain how many *som* constructions there are "out there", and as a consequence we have no idea what proportions of the *att-som* variable are expressed by one or the other construction.