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Plain Language in Sweden: a Progress Report

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Plain Language in Sweden: a Progress Report

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Toronto, Friday 27 October, 2002

First of all we have to make one thing absolutely clear: This presentation will aim to answer only three questions. One: What, if anything, is unique to Sweden when it comes to plain language work? Two: What progress, if any, have we made in the last few years? And three: What are the key challenges that lie ahead, if any?

Before we start answering these questions, we will try to give you a quick overview of the environment we are working in, and where we come from. Sweden has nine million inhabitants and most of us have Swedish as mother tongue. Since 1995, Sweden is a member of the European Union, which today has 15 members but soon may grow to comprise 25 countries.

To promote clear language in official documents, and to encourage authorities all over Sweden to start plain language projects, has been the mission of the Plain Swedish Group since its start in 1993. If people are to take an active interest in what is going on in society, to question things and to contribute to the democratic process, information must be available!

We will continue to talk more about what we actually do in our presentation. But back to the first of our original questions.

We would claim that there are at least four unique, or characteristic, things about plain language work in Sweden: It has a long history. It is being done systematically at the highest level. There are well-developed networks. And there is continuous skill-building going on.

Long history

To begin with, plain language in Sweden has a very long history. Already in the 17th century, the King of Sweden realised the benefits of a clear, legal language and appointed learned men to write a legislation that was clear and reflected common usage of Swedish.

But moving forward in time, there are three important dates we would like to emphasize. 1976. 1978. And 1993. In 1976, The Swedish Government for the first time employed a language expert, a post which had no precedent either in Sweden, or in the rest of Europe. His name was Per



Lundahl. His mission: To organize a systematic modernisation of the language in Government Acts and regulations.

In 1978, the University started a brand new academic programme, The Language Consultancy Programme, with the aim of creating a whole new group of professionals. That is, professionals with a special expertise in the Swedish language that would make them perfectly suited to work with the modernisation of the language, not only in the Government Offices, but also in a number of authorities.

1993 is definitely a year to remember. It was the year when the Plain Swedish Group was set up. Between 1989 and 1992 plain language consultants worked in a plain language project at the National Institute for Staff Development. Their work resulted in the report *It is definitely possible to alter the official language* which contains an analysis of the official language and suggests methods for changing the writing habits of the authorities. The report paved the way for the plain language work among the authorities. In December 1993, the Swedish government appointed the Plain Swedish Group to promote clear language in official documents and to encourage government agencies all over Sweden to start plain language projects.

Systematic work at the highest level

If "Long history" is the first characteristic, "Systematic work at the highest level" is maybe the most important one.

As far as we know, few countries, if any, have so many language experts established inside the Government Offices and with such a strong mandate as we have. In the beginning, the attempts to modernize the language in the Government Offices were met with a great deal of scepticism. Since then, the acceptance has grown gradually. And the number of language experts in the Offices has grown from one to six.

So, how is our work organized today? What do we language experts actually do to ensure high quality in the documents produced?

The dominating part of our work is devoted to text revision of legal documents. Thus, it is no coincidence that we are stationed the Division for Legal and Linguistic Draft Revision at the Ministry of Justice. At the division we are five lawyers and five linguists working in close cooperation, each of us with a special responsibility for certain ministries.

First, it is necessary to say a few words about our position in the law-making process. The three most important types of documents produced in the Government Offices are government bills, government ordinances and committee terms of reference. All these documents are drafted by officials in the different ministries. And all of these documents have to be sent to our division. One copy to a lawyer, one copy to a language expert. None of



these documents can be sent to the printers without our approval. This of course gives us a very strong position and ample opportunity to have real influence on the language used. Naturally, this position should not be misused. We should of course never slow down the law-making process for no good reason.

Although we have this strong position, the impact of text revision is limited. Documents reach us late in the process, and normally there is very little time to make all the changes we would like to.

Therefore, we try to influence the drafters to adopt a reader-friendly style to begin with, mainly through training sessions. There are a number of such customized training sessions every year. One training session is designed specifically to the problems of writing government bills, another one to the reports written by the committees.

When it comes to our everyday work, counselling is an important feature. By telephone or e-mail we constantly receive questions on language use, predominantly from the different ministries. The questions span from the smallest detail – like “should there be a capital letter here or not” – to extensive and complicated matters which may require in-depth investigations involving experts from outside the Government Offices.

Helping drafters to help themselves is essential. Therefore, we have put much effort into producing relevant handbooks and guidelines. Although you sometimes meet people who have never heard of these books, it is evident that they are widely used and appreciated. There is one book that tells you how to write accurately in terms of spelling, punctuation, abbreviation etc. One book on how to write on a website. One book on how to write a Government Bill etc.

One of our most well-known guidelines is called the Black List. Here we list a number of words and expressions we consider too archaic or too ambiguous. Next to each expression, we list our suggestions for what they could write instead. We plan to publish a new edition of the Black List next year.

The Plain Swedish Group

Who we are

Law and language are two very different disciplines, which on the one hand are interdependent, and on the other hand conflicting. We believe that law and language ought to go hand in hand. Therefore, we have chosen to bridge the gap between the fields. In the Plain Swedish Group there are representatives of different disciplines, all with their own experiences of the importance of clear language. The group consists of three judges, two linguists, two information managers and two political scientists. The participation of the judges is of utmost importance in our work. They are



our plain language ambassadors. Their names and positions make it easier for us to convince other lawyers and put pressure on the directors of the authorities.

What we do

Since its start, the Plain Swedish Group has worked in close contact with the Swedish authorities. We are now proud to have a contact person at every government authority in Sweden. These plain language enthusiasts often have a special responsibility for language matters, and some of them have organised networks including other authorities from the same geographical region.

Every year, we arrange plain language conferences to which all kinds of civil servants, such as county governors, directors-general, lawyers, information officers and secretaries, have been invited. The conferences are usually held at the Conference Center in the government building Rosenbad in Stockholm. Sometimes, we organise conferences together with local and government authorities, sometimes we participate in events arranged by other organisations in Sweden or abroad.

The Plain Swedish Group also

- supplies knowledge, ideas and experiences from various plain language projects in Sweden and abroad
- gives lectures on plain language to the authorities
- edits a plain language bulletin, Klarspråksbulletinen
- manages a web site: www.justitie.regeringen.se/klarsprak

The Plain Swedish Crystal

In May of every year, the Plain Swedish Group awards the Plain Swedish Crystal to an authority that has obtained good results in its plain language work. The award aims to encourage government and local authorities to continue their important work.

In 2002, the Minister for Development Cooperation, Migration and Asylum Policy awarded the Crystal to a Government Committee at a conference on the theme Plain Language for everybody. This was the fifth time The Plain Swedish Crystal was awarded, and also the year when as many as 22 authorities were nominated.

The committee got the award thanks to a well-written report, *Death concerns us all - worthy care at the end of life*. The report charts and analyses how people experience health care at the end of life and proposes measures to ensure all terminally ill or dying people receive care of good quality and adequate relief from pain and other symptoms. The award jury



found the report a “model of clearness and high quality from the point of view of content.”

Two other authorities also received awards: The National Board of Health and Welfare and The Swedish National Tax Board.

In 2001, the Minister for Democratic Issues, Public Administration and Consumer Policies awarded the Crystal to the local authority of Borås.

The winner of 2000 was Margareta Ringqvist, at the The Swedish Agency for Administrative Development, who got the award thanks to a report written in an exceptionally clear way.

The authorities

More than half of all Swedish government authorities are currently involved in plain language projects. Eight years ago, most of the authorities were not involved in any plain language work at all. The interest in plain language is growing day by day.

In 1999, the Plain Swedish Group sent a questionnaire to 116 government authorities. The result showed that the authorities had become more interested in plain language. 60 % of the authorities had been involved in plain language projects during the previous two years and 70 % declared that they were planning for future plain language projects. 80 % of the respondents had participated in seminars arranged by the Plain Swedish Group, revised their standard phrases, bought style guides and other language handbooks. 60 % had occasionally engaged a plain language consultant. The figures speak for themselves. In 1994, by comparison, 62 % of the authorities were not involved in any plain language work at all, and 65 % felt no need to participate in plain language projects.

Better service to the public

Most of the authorities say that the motivation for their plain language work is to improve the service to the public. The interest in the Plain Swedish for everyone seminar of 2002, where 140 representatives from authorities all over Sweden participated, also proves this.

Important inspiration

In 1999, 90 % of the authorities thought that the Plain Swedish Group was important for the plain language work. Some of them wrote: “It is very important that the Government offices stand up for plain language” and “The inspiring seminars are of great value.”

90 % of them regularly read the Plain Language Bulletin, the group’s newsletter.



New evaluation

In 2001, the work of the Plain Swedish Group was evaluated by the Swedish Agency for Administrative Development. The results showed that the public authorities are still very positive about the support from the group.

Conferences, our web site, the Plain Language Bulletin, handbooks and guidelines, lectures and advice on language questions are very appreciated activities.

But the authorities keep asking for more. They want The Plain Swedish Group to have a more adequate organisation, they want more software as a help in language matters, more help to manage evaluations of the plain language work at the authorities, help in EU-related matters and also want to be provided with arguments for the importance of plain language work and good examples to show that it pays off.

Well developed networks

All over the world, there are plain language consultants, highly proficient professionals who work hard to make a difference. What we find can really make a difference is if these enthusiasts link together and cooperate in networks, formalized, yet non-bureaucratic networks. There is a number of such networks in Sweden, and there is a growing awareness that we also need to have networks that cross national borders.

The Language Cultivation Group

An important national network is the Language Cultivation Group (Språkvårdsgruppen), which comprises all of the most important groups and organisations dealing with questions of language use. Among others, it comprises the Swedish Academy, best known perhaps for the Nobel Prize in literature, but also very active in language matters. With its long tradition going back hundreds of years, it is also very much looked up to. The network also comprises the Swedish Language Council, Sweden's official institution for language cultivation. Furthermore, the network comprises the Terminology Centre TNC, an institution dedicated to matters of terminology in a number of fields. In the network there are also representatives from the biggest newspapers and from the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation. At their meetings, which are held four times a year, burning topics are discussed and, normally, the representatives manage to agree on a joint statement. This kind of statement has great impact, since all the major players in the language business are behind it.



Samspråk

One of the representatives in the network is Samspråk, which in itself is a network that gathers plain language workers from different authorities in Sweden.

Important contact persons at the authorities

Since its start, the Plain Swedish Group has worked in close contact with the Swedish authorities. Today we are proud to have a contact person at every government authority in Sweden. These plain language enthusiasts often have a special responsibility for language matters, and some of them have organised networks including other authorities from the same region.

The Swedish Patent and Registration Office : They started a plain language project nine years ago by commissioning a special group of lawyers to revise templates for administrative decisions and other computerized texts.

The National Board of Student Aid: The National Board of Student Aid employed a plain language consultant in 1997 to train the staff in clear writing and to develop a language web site on the intranet.

The Regional Social Insurance Office in Västerås: In 1998, the Regional Social Insurance Office in Västerås was awarded for "transforming complicated rules to intelligible documents for the public".

Plain Language Network of Dalarna: In the region of Dalarna, the County Administrative Board, the County Council and the Regional Social Insurance Office are working together to increase the interest in language matters.

The Swedish Migration Board and the Aliens Appeals Board:

Authorities such as the Swedish Migration Board and the Aliens Appeals Board, which often are in contact with people who do not have Swedish as their mother tongue, have started plain language projects to improve the communication with the public and to show that they care and want people to understand the reasons for their decisions.

ESS

Another kind of network is the ESS – an association for all those who have graduated from the Language Consultancy Programme mentioned earlier. Today, there are more than 250 members and the number keeps growing as more and more students are enrolled in the programme. Compared to most



professional categories, that of the language consultant is still a small one. However, thanks to the ESS we are given a professional identity. Other important tasks of the ESS are to market our services, to provide opportunities to exchange experiences and, not least, to arrange social events. The ESS organizes several seminars every year and one big, annual conference. It also publishes a bulletin and manages a web site, where you can search for a specific service, for instance text revision, and get the names and contact information of all those who offer that particular service.

Continuous skill-building

The Language Consultancy programme

For more than 20 years, an education programme in Swedish Language Consultancy has been offered by Stockholm University. The program, run by the Department of Scandinavian Languages, was set up in 1978 as a consequence of the debates on plain Swedish and democracy in the 70's. Thus, the main interest in the beginning was to reform the bureaucratic language of public authorities, and soon language consultants were on the staff of the Swedish government and engaged in plain language projects.

Obviously, the programme has changed character the last few decades, due to both societal and academic factors. The so-called knowledge or information society has affected the labour market, and the so-called social turn of linguistics has produced theoretical insights in for example writing research and discourse analysis, and empirical insights in the communication of different organisations. Today, the job market for Certified Swedish Language Consultants comprises the public as well as the private sector, where the work generally focuses on providing training courses in communication and information, writing and editing texts, handling public relations etc., not least in the computer sector.

Special admission test

The programme in Swedish Language Consultancy starts every other year and it runs for five terms. A high proficiency in Swedish is required. Approximately 20 candidates, out of 300 applicants, are admitted each time, through a special admission test. The programme combines lectures, seminars, discussions, practice and independent work under tutorial guidance. It aims at providing the students with a solid knowledge of all aspects of the Swedish language. The focus is on socio-linguistics in a wide sense, including both applied and theoretical aspects, written and spoken discourse and different media, e.g. the Internet.



Learn how to write straightforward texts

Throughout the programme, theoretical and practical aspects of language and communication are integrated. Courses and seminars are given in, for example, text linguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, Swedish grammar, rhetoric, psycholinguistics and language technology. Independent essay projects are carried out by the University in collaboration with different public organisations and private companies. The students are trained in communication through writing courses and professional practice. From the programme, the students learn how to write clear, precise, straightforward Swedish, tailored to the reader's needs.

Wide job market

Upon graduating from the programme, the participants receive a University Diploma in Swedish Consultancy. Consultants often work on the permanent staff of different public and private organisations or on a free-lance basis.

What has happened since last time?

We now arrive at the second question of our presentation: What has happened in the past two years, since we talked about Sweden at the Houston conference? Well, apart from still doing all the things we have just talked about, there are three things that are new and essential for plain language work in Sweden. Firstly, we have now organized our efforts to influence the style of language used in the European Union. Secondly, we have developed a new tool, the Plain Language Test. And thirdly, a Government Committee has presented an Action Programme for the Swedish language.

As we have said, much progress has been made in Sweden when it comes to introducing plain language in the legislation. But we feel that much of this is threatened by the influence of the European Union, i.e., Union Regulations and Directives that need to be incorporated in Swedish law are often written in a style that we find anything but plain, clear and reader-friendly. For many years we have been aware of the fact that something ought to be done to change the structure and style of these documents. But how? We have written articles, we have talked about it on many occasions. But those efforts were not powerful enough, not focused enough.

Last year we got the opportunity to get Europe's attention, since Sweden held the Presidency of the European Union from January to July. During our Presidency, one of the top conferences was the European Law Conference gathering top lawyers from all of the Member States of the Union. Thanks to a lot of lobby work, we managed to make "Clear language" one of the major themes of the conference. We also managed to get prominent



speakers from different parts of the world: Professor Kimble of the United States, Tjeenk Willink, the most prominent lawyer of the Netherlands, Mrs. Wagner, Head of Translators at the European Commission, Professor Fioritti of Italy, Mme Fernbach of Canada and Mr. Cutts of the United Kingdom. The title for our theme of the conference was “Bridging the Gap between the European Union and its Citizens.” At the conference, it was stressed that European legislation needs to be both accessible and comprehensible. Unfortunately, resistance has been strong. However, Professor Kimble very effectively refuted all serious charges against plain language. He showed that plain language can be precise, that it is preferred by the readers, that it does improve comprehension, and that it does save time and money. Claims have also been made that the Union Regulations and Directives are so special that they cannot be accurately transformed into another style or structure. But at the conference, Mr Cutts showed and described the work he had done re-writing a Union Directive. We believe that Mr Cutts has found a model that can convey the contents of a Directive in a way that is very easy to understand, and we hope that the ideas behind this re-write will gain acceptance in wider circles.

What is new about our efforts to influence the language use in the European Union is also that a new post has been created in the Government Offices – a language expert dedicated specially to issues of language use in the Union. The tasks related to this post are many. It’s to help draft guidelines, revise documents and give advice. But even more important is the task of creating a network of contacts and to coordinate efforts. The network is to include contact persons at all authorities in Sweden, at the Institutions in the European Union and in other Member States of the Union. Soon, a web site will also open. Here, news will be published about the language work going on both in Sweden and in the rest of Europe. There will be a Q and A section, and here we will also collect a great number of guidelines and books on-line. Our aim is also to use the web site as a platform for debate.

We should not omit to say that there is a lot of reform work going on in Brussels. For instance, an Action Plan for better law-making was recently presented, which included many promising ideas. One example is the following quote:

”By being written in a less complicated style, Community legislation should be easier to implement for the Member States and operators concerned and easier for everyone to read and understand.”

An important event in Sweden during the past two years was the Government decision to appoint a committee for the Swedish language. Its



mission was to investigate the situation of the Swedish language and to present an action programme that could protect and strengthen the position of Swedish. Why the need for such a committee? Well, the language situation in Sweden has changed a lot in the last few decades.

Sweden has changed into a more multilingual society, primarily because of immigration (there are between 150 and 200 immigrant languages, spoken by together almost 1 million people) but also as a result of the elevation some years ago of five languages to the status of national minority languages: Finnish, Saami, Torne Valley Finnish, Rom and Yiddish.

Furthermore, English has won an increasingly strong position internationally, thereby also becoming a more and more important language in certain domains, such as science, higher education and industrial and commercial life.

The Committee has put forward a number of suggestions to promote the use of Swedish in various fields. It also recommends that a special act be introduced that establishes the status of Swedish as the official language of Sweden. Moreover, the Committee suggests that a new Language Authority is set up, beefing up the organized language work with additional resources.

In the suggestions of the committee regarding plain language activities they also pay close attention to questions related to the work within the EU, and they stress the importance of plain language efforts within the various bodies of the union, e.g. the “Fight the fog” campaign at the Commission.

The Comprehensibility Evaluation

Evaluation of comprehensibility

Last year, an evaluation of the comprehensibility in texts from public authorities was carried out by the Swedish Agency for Administrative Development. The evaluation focused on three different kinds of text: brochures, reports and administrative decisions. For each of these kinds of text, a questionnaire was designed in order to identify comprehensibility problems as well as features that facilitate understanding. These questionnaires were applied to nine different, highly representative, texts written by employees of different public authorities, who regularly write these kinds of text. Linguists, with experience in plain language work, also commented upon the texts scrutinized.

Authority texts have changed

The results of this two-step evaluation show that texts from public authorities actually have changed during the last decades. Above all, there has been great improvement as to vocabulary. Complicated and old-fashioned words traditionally used in bureaucratic texts have become less



frequent. One explanation of this improvement might be that these words have been “blacklisted” by the Plain Swedish Group for some time. This effort seems to have paid off.

A classic problem

A classic comprehensibility problem in Swedish texts from public authorities regards sentence length. Sentences tend to be too long and too complex with many subordinate clauses, long noun phrases and many insertions. There has been some improvement even in this respect, but there is still room for more!

Lack of adaptation to the reader

The main comprehensibility problems in today’s texts from public authorities lie neither in syntax nor vocabulary but in the lack of adaptation to the reader, in content as well as in text structure. The content of the texts is often criticised for not being relevant or not put in layman’s terms. When it comes to text structure, the texts often lack meta-comments, which could guide the reader through the text. Headings and sub-headings tend not to be informative enough; in some cases they are even misleading.

Enhance the focus on readers

To sum up, the most important problem for future plain language work must be to enhance the focus on the reader. Public authority writers must know the importance of adaptation and be careful not only in their choice of information and vocabulary, but also in the structuring of texts. Such efforts seem to be the most effective way to achieve even more comprehensible texts.

The Plain Language Test

Measure comprehensibility?

Based on the evaluation, Catharina Nyström, PhD, from Uppsala University, developed a check list to be used by writers at the authorities. The check list consists of 35 questions divided under five headings, concerning different aspects of the text: adaptation to the needs of the reader, message, text structure and textual cohesion, syntax and words and phrases.

These questions are all crucial to the comprehensibility of the text. This checklist was developed into an interactive web test in 2002.

Before writing

On the starting page are instructions, of course, but also four questions that every writer should consider before writing a text. The point of these questions is to make the writer aware of the reader’s perspective.



1. Who is the expected reader of the text?
2. What might the reader expect from the text he or she is about to receive?
3. What previous knowledge of the subject does the reader have?
4. Why would the intended reader want to read your text?

The Plain Language Test asks – you answer

When you are using the test on a text, you answer the questions one by one, for example *Is the content relevant to the readers?* Answer “yes”, “uncertain” or “no” and you will find that the answers are given as markings on scales. The idea is that these markings form the base of an overall measurement of comprehensibility. After each level you check the markings, and the test informs you that your text is “very comprehensible”, “less comprehensible” or simply “comprehensible”. To help you, there are linked key words that lead to explanations and examples.

When should you test your text?

You may use the Plain Language Test at different stages of your writing. Before you write you may skim through the questions. Or you may test a rough draft. Of course, you may test a completed text. The best thing is to read through the questions before you write and then check the first draft. Then you still have plenty of time to revise your text.

Welcome to our web site

You are welcome to visit our web site Klarspråk at www.justitie.regeringen.se/klarsprak. Click on the picture of the hand at the top right. Unfortunately, the test is only available in Swedish.

Challenges

Now for the final question: What are the challenges that lie ahead, if any? Of course, there are challenges. One question mark that needs to be straightened out is the future of the Plain Swedish Group. In the action programme, it is suggested that the Plain Swedish Group should be moved from the Government Offices to the new language authority. If so, there is a risk that the group will lose some of its high status. But on the other hand, the new authority may prove to be a better platform, not least because it is suggested that their resources should be increased. Instead of one person in the Secretariat, there should be four.

The biggest challenge no doubt concerns our aim to change the writing patterns in the European Union. Here, we can expect quite a lot of resistance, and it is not clear what methods will work most effectively. But even here we see positive signs. Organized work has begun, and we believe that the awareness about the need for clarity is growing all over Europe.



Plain Language in Sweden: a Progress Report

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Plain Language in Sweden: a Progress Report

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Maria Sundin has worked in the secretariat of The Plain Swedish Group since 2000. Previously she worked as a freelance language consultant and a teacher of Swedish and English in senior secondary school. She has a B.A. in Swedish and English and further academic qualifications in language consultancy.