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Collecting dialect data and making use of them: an interim report from Swedia 2000ⁱ

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Abstract

This paper consists of two, somewhat disparate parts. In the first part, some experiences of two years of fieldwork are summarized, concentrating, as the subtitle suggests, on the very heart of phonetic fieldwork: the encounters and interviews with the informants. As a result of the fieldwork, the project now has access to recordings from approximately 1300 speakers of more than 100 dialects of Swedish. We are currently initiating research on various aspects of the sound patterns of these dialects. The second part of the paper is meant to give an overview of some of our research plans for the near future.

1. In the field: Approaching the informant

For the past two years, two of the authors (MS, IT) have been recording various southern Swedish dialects. The purpose of this part of the paper is to describe how we have approached informants to obtain the most natural dialect recordings. In our experience, this goal is best achieved through long and coherent monologues about the informants' favorite topics. One of our tasks has been to find these topics.

After taking the first contact by telephone, the very first ten minutes of the actual meeting with the informant are critical to whether the interview will be successful or not. It is essential to create a friendly and unpretentious atmosphere right from the start. We believe that, in the initial phase, just talking about this and that and creating a personal rather than professional atmosphere is better than immediately giving a lot of serious information about the project and the procedures to be followed. An overly serious attitude at this stage may provoke insecurity and a sense of not living up to expected demands. It may seem obvious, but we would nevertheless like to point out the importance of a happy face. In addition, a sense of humor is an unsurpassed way of making a nervous informant relax. However, exaggerating the humorous, happy and encouraging attitude can easily give a negative impression and endanger one's credibility.

Defining the roles within the recording crew is an essential prerequisite for this kind of teamwork. Typically, one member of the team functions as an interviewer, while the other member, the 'technician', handles the recording equipment. Once settled, it is thus important that the interviewer takes charge of the situation. The technician should stay in the background before as well as during the interview. In our experience, this creates a calm and confidential atmosphere, as it is more convenient for the informant to direct his/her attention to one rather than two persons. In this phase, the interviewer should tell the informant about the project and, if necessary, turn off disturbing sound sources, close doors, etc. To avoid creating a distance between the interviewer and the informant, the reasons for performing the various recording tasks and the procedures to be followed should be

described in an easy way without professional terminology. The informant will take the task seriously even if it is described in a non-technical way.

In order to carry out a successful interview, it is important to come close enough to the informant so that he/she will, without inhibition, tell a spontaneous story of his/her life. At each interview session, the interviewer has to be flexible, attentive and genuinely interested in the informant. To protect the informant's integrity, the interviewer should exercise his/her authority with delicacy.

In order to obtain long and coherent monologues, it is preferable to have the informant answer and develop big themes. It is also advisable to fully explore every aspect of a topic before moving on. Small follow-up questions relating to the main theme give the impression that the interviewer is genuinely interested. However, many small questions may cause too many yes/no answers. Emphasizing one's own ignorance or acting ignorant may sometimes encourage the informant to go on talking.

Since the interviewer's speaking style easily influences that of the informant, the interviewer should not speak too fast. Pausing now and then allows time for reflection and initiating new ideas and topics. Feedback to the informant should not be given verbally but by means of facial expressions and body language; after all, we are able to say a lot merely with our eyes. To avoid disturbing the monologues or reminding the informant of our own dialects, we try to be as quiet as possible during the interview. In particular, we try to focus on the stories rather than on the language. When the informant concentrates on the story and becomes unaware of how he/she speaks, the dialect comes out most naturally.

In conclusion, nothing is impossible. So far we have never encountered an unsolved problem or an impossible situation. As a team, we have to be flexible and rely on one another in order to solve problems in a positive spirit. However, it is highly recommended that inexperienced interviewers get some form of guidance before beginning their work. Many details that appear obvious might take a lot of time and experience to learn.

2. In the lab: Making use of the data

This part of the paper presents a brief sketch of a few of the research initiatives and working hypotheses that we are presently considering. They include: acoustic realization of vowel inventories with special reference to the Pite dialect, historical and typological aspects of the quantity contrast, and problems of the word accent contrast in the Orsa dialect.

Acoustic realization of vowel inventories: The Pite dialect, Standard Swedish, and the quantal theory

Preliminary acoustic measurements on samples produced by two male speakers suggest that the Pite dialect displays considerably more fronted and more open vowels than Standard Swedish (see figure 1). The data available to date seem almost identical to those presented in Johansson's (1982) study of northern Swedish town dialects. Further measurements will show whether these data are representative of a larger, regional northern variety of Swedish. It should be noted that both auditory and acoustic analyses suggest that long Pite vowels are frequently diphthongized. To some extent, then, the selection of measurement points along moving formants could provide a partial explanation of the noted differences between the Pite dialect and Standard Swedish.

The Pite vowel data also have a bearing on the general problem of the distribution of vowels in acoustic space. The Quantal Theory (QT) of speech (Stevens 1989) predicts that languages will select their basic vowel elements at acoustic stability regions ('hot spots'). The distribution of quantal vowels would thus be independent of inventory size. In particular, two almost equally sized and phonologically structured inventories (such as the Pite dialect and Standard Swedish) would not be expected to differ appreciably in the location of quantal vowels in acoustic space. It is obvious that the preliminary results illustrated in figure 1 fail to provide evidence for a QT style clustering of vowels across the two dialects considered (see also Livijn's vowel data on 28 languages in this volume).

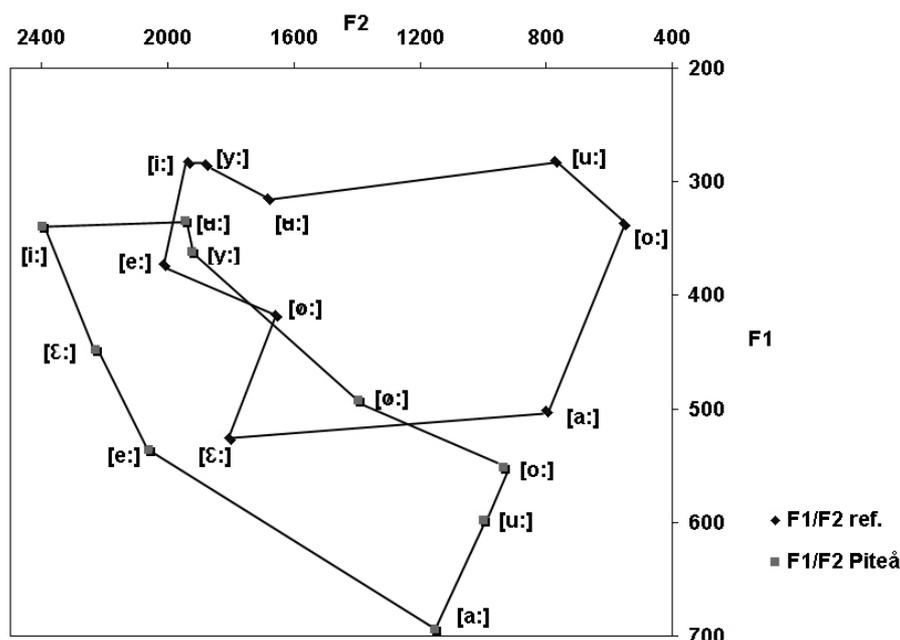


Figure 1. First and second formant frequency (Hz) of the long vowels of the Pite dialect (squares) and Standard Swedish (diamonds). Formant values based on means of at least three repetitions. Male speakers.

The quantity contrast: historical and typological aspects

Old Swedish had four possible length combinations (VC, V:C, VC: and V:C:, e.g., Hesselman 1901). Of these, the 'overlong' V:C: type has disappeared almost completely (but see Nyström 2000), while the 'short' VC type is said to be preserved in some dialects. In other dialects, short syllables have been lengthened, frequently according to phonetically transparent rules (Hesselman 1901, Riad 1992, Björsten et al. 1999).

To what extent do today's Swedish dialects preserve traces of the complex historical quantity system? There is a striking lack of empirical evidence bearing on this question, available information largely coming from regional variants of Swedish rather than local dialects (Elert 1964). It is one purpose of Swedia 2000 to improve this situation using quantitative measurements and models. In the first phase of this study, focus will be on northern Swedish dialects. Later, the survey will be widened to include other dialect areas as well.

Informal observations of the Swedish dialects tell us that the quantity contrast can take various phonetic shapes. In particular, while durational differences may be essential in some dialects, others may depend more on qualitative contrasts, including diphthongization, between long and short vowels. A hypothesis to be tested in this work is that such patterns can form a basis for a phonetic dialect typology. An additional hypothesis is whether these modes of realizing the quantity contrast are usually complementary in the sense that, across dialects, one usually takes precedence over the other.

Acute and grave in the Orsa dialect

The word accents of the Orsa dialect have been specified in terms of differentially timed single peaks appearing early (acute) vs. late (grave) in the stressed syllable (Meyer 1937). After Meyer, there has been no experimental studies of the Orsa word accent contrast. It is possible that the phonetic realization of the accents may have changed over time and that our current notions do not necessarily reflect the accentual system of the dialect as spoken today. Also, at Meyer's time, effects of linguistic variables such as semantic focus and sentence stress (Bruce 1977) were not considered explicitly. A current study of the Orsa accents thus aims at assessing to what extent acute and grave F₀ contours are comparable to those documented by Meyer, and at determining whether the F₀ contrast between the grave and acute accents is preserved in lower degrees of stress. Preliminary results are reported by Olander (this volume).

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