Pre–study – interviews about language use at KI

Part of project to develop language policy at KI

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The project group for Language Policy at KI
(Translated with translation software from original Swedish version)

Karolinska Institutet

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Content

Background and method

In order to get an idea of language use at KI as a basis for a future language policy, the project group has conducted an internal inventory in the form of interviews. The participants in the project group have conducted two to three structured interviews each, based on jointly compiled questions (see appendix 1). The selection of interviewees was made jointly by the working group, where persons from administration, departments, research and education as well as management were selected based on the working group's overall knowledge of the university's organisation. Selected people were invited by email. Among the interviewees are people with different language backgrounds. The interviews were conducted digitally or during physical meetings, in Swedish or English and took about 30 minutes to complete. The questions were sent out in advance.

Use of English and Swedish at KI

At KI , Swedish and English are the main working languages, although employees and students from other countries also have knowledge of for example French, German, Italian, Chinese and Finnish. In the interviews, however, no interviewee stated that languages other than English or Swedish would be relevant to one's activities at KI. However, parallel linguistics, which means the simultaneous use of two languages, are not a reality in all contexts. In some contexts, English dominates, in others Swedish and in some both languages are used in parallel.

KI is a Swedish authority and in many contexts only Swedish is used. This applies, for example, to the writing of referrals, letters, "*formal documents*", collaboration agreements with the Region, patient information, and at meetings of the Committee for Education or the Faculty Board.

KI is an international university, which is equivalent to being able to function in English: "We are *in an international university, and we are part of KI, English is the work language*." In lab environments with researchers from different countries, in scientific publishing, at international conferences and in parts of the teaching, English is almost exclusively used. However, in other activities, such as HR, union work, communication, teaching at undergraduate level, activities towards the Regions, services of various kinds and in higher administrative positions, both English and Swedish are used to different extents.

Attitudes and attitudes towards language use

Not only the actual use of the two languages Swedish and English differs, but also attitudes and values about when, where and how each language should be used. In general, people tend to have a relatively positive attitude towards using English. If you have a first language other than English, you often accept that English is a necessary tool. "*For me, it is a matter of course to work in English … Our supervisors are English speaking, so the students who write a master's thesis do so in English, 50 percent of them do so.*" Speaking and writing in English is rarely seen as an obstacle for those with

Swedish as their first language in these contexts. "*I've gotten used to speaking half-bad English*" even though you also express that you feel "quicker" and can express more complex reasoning in Swedish. In this context, irritation is sometimes expressed at colleagues who *"do not want to teach in English"*.

In other parts of the organisation than research/teaching/higher administration, however, there is a more fragmented view of the use of English. People with first languages other than Swedish, but not only those with English as their first language, express that speaking and writing English is not a problem at all – they are used to using English. "*I don't even notice that I switch between Swedish and English.*" However, other interviewees, mainly first language speakers of Swedish, express that they feel that the use of English can sometimes be perceived as problematic. On the one hand, it expresses that in contexts where English is the given language, one may feel excluded. "*When I am greeted by signs with English-language information at KIB, I do not feel welcome*". On the one hand, there is a perception that discussions where first language speakers of English are present are dominated by the latter and that the majority therefore do not have the opportunity to make themselves heard because, for example, they lack vocabulary. Even in teaching, students (with Swedish as their first language or second language) are perceived to speak less when the conversation takes place in English. Exclusion can also be experienced in reverse, by people who do not speak Swedish. "*I experience a bigger problem with the Region (which we work closely with) that does not / and does not like to speak English and deliberately excludes those in (my) organization who do not speak Swedish.* "

Interviewees with English as their first language (or only working language) are generally very positive about the widespread use of English. "*Everybody understands English*". Others regret that they have not learned Swedish even though they have lived in Sweden and worked at KI for many years. "*I am a bad example when it comes to learning Swedish. I tell my students that they need to learn Swedish*".

Someone expresses that they are hesitant to use Swedish in their profession. "*There is a difference between coffee-machine-Swedish and giving feedback on important documents and discuss complex matters in decision making. [...] In the clinic it is important that I understand correctly*". The interviewee has studied Swedish at Folkuniversitetet but does not want to use the language in their work because it is embarrassing to say the wrong thing. However, they can imagine using it in informal contexts, for example in their free time.

Not wanting to learn Swedish even though you live in Sweden and work at KI is seen as negative by some interviewees. A couple of interviewees believe that there should be a willingness and an interest among those who are not first language speakers of Swedish to learn the language and to integrate. "*Especially people with English as their mother tongue show a reluctance to learn Swedish. Employees with origins other than the Anglo-Saxon seem to have fewer problems learning Swedish and integrating.*"

Another perspective on not learning Swedish is to not as naturally become part of a larger KI context. "*The disadvantage may be that the groups where you speak poorly or*

do not speak Swedish at all have a tendency to become enclaves within KI's Swedish-speaking context, and this makes cooperation and identification with KI more difficult."

The description above shows that English and Swedish are not always perceived to coexist harmoniously. However, several interviewees spontaneously touch on the importance of helping each other to facilitate communication for each other in situations where the language is lacking. Examples of different ways to facilitate communication are to help each other find words, to adapt the communication to how much you think the recipient understands, that you answer emails in the language the email was received and that you are clear about telling if you do not understand. *"The contact or willingness to take in is more crucial than the language itself."*

Perception that communication is deficient due to one's own or others' lack of linguistic competence

When it comes to the question of whether one feels that there is a lack of competence in oneself or in others that causes language difficulties, there is a relatively large variation between the interviewees. When it comes to the view of their own competence, some say that they would like to have competence development in English, mainly in their specialist areas, especially regarding terminology and vocabulary for their own sake. When it comes to the view of other people's competence, there are perceptions that there is a lack of competence in both Swedish and English. Some point out that it is necessary to master both languages equally well to work at KI. Good knowledge of both Swedish and English, both written and oral, for all employees is an important part of the competence profile. . *"There are not similar competence requirements for foreign researchers who sometimes do not have sufficient skills in English or Swedish to understand the legislation for ethical norms and permits that someone else has formulated for them. This creates misunderstandings, ambiguity and uncertainty."*

Some interviewees believe that language requirements should be introduced in recruitment. " [Clearer *competence profiles for each language should be specified]*
when recruiting in order to better evaluate the actual linguistic competence of the applicant.
*In order to advance and make a career, an interview shows that it is important to highlight the importance of knowing Swedish in a clearer way."*Parellelllingism is important, but in research you can work for years without knowing a word of Swedish. But then it suddenly stops when you want to make a career at KI. "*That is, as head of department or head of department, you MUST know Swedish. You have to be eloquent with nuanced language skills both orally and in writing to be able to argue, persuade and learn from others through dialogue and discussion*!"

Recommendations and need for support

Some interviewees state that they do not need linguistic support or that they do not "always have time to look for glossaries". However, several interviewees say

that they have the support they need and know where to find information if they need it. Some state that KI's bilingual website in many cases serves as a good support. "*Looking for 'This page in Swedish' and 'this page in English', is usually found*".

Several interviewees use Google Translate and other translation tools and highlight the writing support and templates that the Communications Department has developed. Some also know that there are some writing rules (both internal and external). However, some would like to see language support integrated into our daily systems (Office 365).

Some interviewees mention that language reviewers of both Swedish and English would be desirable and that they would like to develop skills in English or Swedish depending on their needs. "*Thinking about finding a refresher or some form of HR English.* "

In conversations about language use, interviewees have also touched on communication in general and expressed a desire for writing support for writing briefly and clearly on the web regardless of language. Writing for the web requires a different language than policy documents and investigations. "*There are tensions in the use of language when moving between legislation/official language and how to adapt language for the web, which often needs to be simplified and shortened. It's a challenge. It can lead to language confusion/misunderstanding of concepts even within the same language.*"

Views on accessibility related to language

Several interviewees did not have an answer to the question concerning accessibility and language use. Whether we use the word "hen" (singular they) routinely at KI was not clear to one of the interviewees. One interviewee believes that much remains to be done to get everyone to take responsibility for accessibility at KI. "*When the accessibility directive came, KI took it completely wrong. That is left to others to take care of was the reaction from above. Everyone at KI should have that expertise. It should be as basic as all competencies in the same way as you are expected to have computer skills or know the Office package for your work. You have to make it accessible, quite naturally.*"