Swedishness through *lagom*
Can words tell us anything about a culture?

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How much can words tell us about the culture behind them?
Every language has its particular words that are not translatable to other languages; similar words in various languages may hide different meanings or connotations; expressions and folk sayings are often peculiar to a language and to a people. To what extent can we use such peculiarities to describe the culture they pertain to? How much can *lagom* tell us about Swedishness? In a game like form I try to give an overview of the Swedish culture through the Swedish language.

The interest for culture has been expanding in the last decades. What initially was restricted to anthropology, has been growing, now being the object of study in many other disciplines. Economics, management, politics and psychology are only some examples of it. The pendulum has swung even too much. Culture and cultural factors suddenly seem to be the explanatory factors of everything: suicide and divorce rates, financial crisis or even civil wars are explained in cultural terms. As Adam Kuper (1999) points out, the excess lies in culture becoming the source of explanation par excellence, instead of something to be described and explained. Culture has become *the* explanation, instead of remaining in a more humble corner. In this paper, I will take the more humble of these positions, and will try to describe one culture, the Swedish.

In the intent to describe what culture is, it is sometimes viewed as something more than shared values and beliefs. It is the mean we help ourselves with to make sense of our environment and give meaning to others' and ours actions. As Bruner (1990) puts it, culture stores the symbolic resources that help to give meaning in a "lifelike" manner. Besides, it is often said that language bears culture. Shotter (1993) maintains that our ways of talking constitute the way we make sense of ourselves and our world. An analysis of how cultural members use their language may give us a fair picture of the specific traits of their own culture.

After going through the view of culture as a system of meaning, and language as a cultural carrier, I will try to give a broad picture of Swedish culture, understood as a system of meaning, by looking at Swedish language and its use. I do not try to be exhaustive neither to generalise. Not all Swedes behave and think the same way. That would be an easy stereotype! However, Swedish culture is a peculiar symbolic discourse talking about the collective Swedish identity. Rests to say that I am describing the

Swedish culture from the point of view (and bias!) of another peculiar symbolic discourse, the Spanish one. Such peculiarities are often a source of confusion and misunderstanding when cultures meet, but as they appear in the comparison between cultures, they become also a source for understanding each culture.

On Culture and Language

Following Clifford Geertz, culture "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973, p. 89). Culture thus tells us what reality is like and how we should act in it. He adheres to a semiotic definition of culture, and believes culture to be the webs of significance in which man is suspended. The study of such webs of significance or systems of meaning is not an experimental science, but an interpretative one (p. 5).

Jerome Bruner (1990) maintains that we human beings are expressions of a culture. Culture is the store of narrative and symbolic resources helping us to "give meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretative system" (p.34). As he puts it, meaning-making and meaning-using processes connect man to culture. Because we all participate in culture, meaning is rendered shared and public.

When something unusual or unexpected happens, culture provides us with a symbolic structure helping us to give meaning in a "lifelike" manner (p.68), to justify the difference between the happening and the expectation. We construct a narrative justifying the violation of what we took for granted. By putting the difference in the cultural interpretative system we are able to make sense of it (p.39).

Meaning and a shared symbolic structure are connected to language. After all, Bruner says, a narrative is more than the plot (Bruner 1990, p.123). It is the way we tell that plot, the expressions we use and the words we choose. Words, expressions and even grammatical forms can discover us a great deal about the cultural system behind them. John (Shotter 1993) maintains that our "ways of talking constitute our ways of accounting for and making sense of ourselves and our world, they form a lexicon of justificatory ultimates, a whole taken-for-granted vocabulary of things and processes" (p.35). In such a sense, language is the carrier of culture. An analysis of language and already made expressions can therefore help us better understand the specific culture

behind it. Similar is Fairclough's idea when he suggests Critical Discourse Analysis as a method for researching a range of social science and cultural studies questions (Fairclough 1995).

One could wonder though, is it she, a Spanish person, appropriate to describe such a different culture to hers as the Swedish is? Åke Daun (1989) would answer that one is handicapped when studying one's own culture. One is blind to the taken for granted that might not be such for a foreigner. He even maintains that "the deviating frame of reference of foreigners constitutes a "method" to discover cultural particularities". In the same line of thought, Barbara Czarniawska (1998) says that the foreigner comes with a novel reading. By not being socialised in the same system of meaning but still being familiar enough to it as to recognise it, the foreigner brings a new insight. The gap between the standard account got from observation, conversations and interviewing, and the non-standard one or novel reading is itself a source of knowledge (p. 29).

A good way to get an understanding of a given culture is finding out and analysing those words and expressions exclusive to its language, or peculiar uses of words already existing in other languages. In the paper, the method I have used is to review some words typical to the Swedish vocabulary and, by this doing, describe those characteristics that are peculiar to the Swedish culture.

On the method

But before going to the study of Swedish culture through the use Swedes do of their language, I want to make some comments on the study of language peculiarities for cultural analysis.

The study of language to sense a certain culture is a not very common qualitative method, but it is not new either. A good example, Hofstatter's study where Germans associated 'loneliness' with 'big', 'strong', 'healthy', 'courageous', 'deep'; and Americans with 'small', 'weak', 'sick', 'cowardly', 'empty', 'sad', 'shallow', 'obscure', 'bad', 'ugly' (cited in Peabody 1985).

A variation of the method is the semantic differential scale. Pairs of opposing words are used as the extremes of a line where 5 or 7 points have been drawn. The person filling the questionnaire has to choose among the 7 points that better corresponds

with his view or attitude. It works similar to the Likert scales. However, these forms of the method are in a way quantitative since their goal is to be able to measure attitudes.

The second presented version of the method may seem more scientific if judged with the criteria of modern science. But criticisms can be many. Have the same words equal connotations in all languages? Does all the opposing terms exist as such in all languages? A simple study of the Swedish language shows that new words are found in other languages and that common words may have very different meanings. Vocabulary and semantic differences among languages can actually tell us more about a culture than quantitative Likert scales trying to measure and compare attitudes.

The method I opted for has been picking up certain words from the Swedish language that do not exist in any other language, other words that exist but with a different meaning or a special connotation compared to other languages, and common expressions in Swedish daily life. I have arranged the words and expressions in various areas describing different spheres of Swedish culture.

Swedish Culture

The existentialist dilemma of the choice between primarily looking after oneself or taking care of 'the other'[1] in the first place is common to most cultures. Depending on the answer each society provides to this dilemma the culture will be positioned within the line individualism-collectivism. Although both Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1993) describe Sweden as one of the most individualist countries, the GLOBE project shows us that this picture depends on how individualism is defined (Holmberg and Åkerblom 1998). It is argued there that Sweden's culture is characterised by its "socially concerned individualism".

A subtle equilibrium pervades the Swedish character in the way of behaving, the view held of society and of one's role in it. There is a balance between individualism and social concern. According to some observers, Sweden has reconciled both extremes of the dimension (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993). Let's see if a simple study of their language, in a game like form, tells us anything about such a peculiar trait.

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[1] 'The other' is broadly seen here as either the extended family or the wider society in general.

Ensamhet (Loneliness/Solitude)

One of the first striking things when one comes to Sweden as an immigrant from a radically different culture is the positive connotation the word *ensamhet* (solitude) has. It suggests inner peace, independence and personal strength. It is a virtue already taught in early years of life. In the well-known Astrid Lindgren's children books of Pippi Långstrump, it is frequent to hear her saying *Jag kan själv* or *Jag klarar mig själv* (I am able to do it by myself). Children are early encouraged to become independent, since, for the Swedish mentality, independence is equal to maturity (Hendin 1964). *Ensam är stark* (Solitude is strength).

In such an individualist culture, individual freedom is of extreme importance but, curiously, it is a socially responsible freedom. *Att få vara i fred* (To be let in peace) does not only refer to the beauty of finding time for oneself but it is also attentive of others' need of peace in solitude, and respects it (Herlitz 1991). Thus, trust in the other as an individual, reliance in others' capacities and in others' potential answers to problem solution or task implementation, is always present. This has direct consequences in work related issues as managers are easily ready to delegate trusting their subordinates capacity to add to the task being performed and listening to their suggestions (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993).

Individual freedom has a social use; it is a responsible self-government. Personal independence has social responsibilities; solidarity is addressed to the socially weakest not exclusively to the close family relatives. *Att göra rätt för sig* (To make right for oneself) perfectly pictures the moral dimension of Swedish individualism. This expression means both not to owe anything to anybody, as well as to have social solidarity with others' needs. There is a quest to be useful to the wide society, helpful to the abstract 'other' rather than solely to the closest family as it is common in other societies. How would otherwise people accept such a high level of taxes if it wouldn't be for their social concern?

The consequences of this social responsibility are clear at the work level. People do not seek promotion solely on the basis of personal income and individual power but also for the more important contribution they will be able to give to the companies they work for or to society. As Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars put it, the ethic of socially oriented individualism is summarised in the Swedes search "to individualise themselves

by what they contribute to the workplace and to their colleagues" (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993), to give a social use to one's freedom.

Jämlikhet (Equality)

The previously described respect for 'the other' drives Swedes to have a strong sense for equality, or *jämlikhet*. An obvious sign of this is the similar roles played by men and women condensed in the figure of *pappaledighet*: the right for fathers to take some months leave off their jobs when they have had a baby, similar to the women's right. On another sphere, equality and equal right to participate in decision taking is evident in 1976's *Medbestämmandelagen* (the Co-determination Act), guaranteeing unions the formal right to membership in company boards.

The idea of equality is reflected in the informal atmosphere seen at the workplace, where it is not unusual to see the manager making coffee (Hill 1995) or eating with his or her subordinates. Hierarchy does not imply long distances, and certain formal letters may begin with an informal *hej!* (hi!). However, this should not be confounded with a lack of respect towards the other and some touches of formality can be seen addressed to superiors, fellows, subordinates or even friends. An example of this is the use to thank for the last time one was invited to somebody else's, *tack för senast*, even if it was several days ago and from a very close friend.

Enighet (Consensus)

A Swedish trait reflecting the subtle balance between individualism and collectivism is the search for *enighet* (consensus). Everyone's opinions, ideas and experiences are respected and listened to, since all are potential contributors to the accomplishment of the task in place or to the solution of the problem being dealt.

Closely related with this strive for consensus is the Swedish ideal to avoid conflict (*konfliktundvikande*), especially in the public sphere where open quarrels are parried. Therefore, loud voice and aggressive behaviour is dubiously considered and will seldom lead to the desired results. At work, this attitude "is expressed through the lack of corrective actions against personnel that do not perform well" (Forss, Hawk and Hedlund, 1984). Relocation of the badly performing employee is preferred to open, face-to-face conflicts.

The conflict avoidance spirit claims for the Swedish ability to control feelings. Mutual understanding, collective consideration and compromised solutions are favoured.

A kind, polite and neutral attitude is preferred. Emotional issues or arguments are depersonalised and translated into a matter-of-fact making it easier to handle (Åkerblom 1995). Therefore, a special love for rituals is found among Swedes. A well prepared speech by the Managing Director to the just pensioned accountant, preferably including a little joke, is the appreciated way of expressing love and gratitude to a loyal employee; the end of an era. In such way, emotions become predictable and easier to handle.

In this context, *kompromiss* (compromise) is seen as a practical attitude, attaching no negative connotations, what is something highly surprising for the outsider living or working in Sweden (Herlitz 1991). This description connects to Hofstede's (1980) definition of a feminine society, where "humanisation at work takes the form of feminisation – it is a means toward more wholesome interpersonal relationships in its de-emphasis of inter-individual competition". In his seminal study, Sweden was ranked the most feminine society.

At this point, awareness should be called for. Frequently, foreigners mistakenly confuse this search for consensus with indecisiveness (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993). However, as Barbara Czarniawska states it, consensus is seen as a condition for dialogue rather than as the purpose of that dialogue, such attitude enabling a search for creative solutions. This provides Swedish business with its unique capacity for collective action (Czarniawska-Joerges 1993).

Hofstede translates social concern, equality and the search for consensus as Sweden being characterised by a feminine, low power distance culture (Hofstede 1980). While Trompenaars translates such traits as Swedish culture being neutral and self-possessed, universalistic, and oriented towards achievement as opposed to ascription (Trompenaars 1993).

Lagom (Not too much, not too little; Just right!)
The delicate balance between the individual and the collectivity is illustrated by the untranslatable term *lagom*. Its origins are found in Viking times, when a bowl of drink was shared among those seated around the table. Doubts arouse about how much to sip: not too much for the others not to get angry as not enough drink was left for them, not too little as one also wanted to enjoy the drink. Just right!

This term is extensively used in daily life. It mirrors the dilemma between personal freedom and social responsibility, between informal relations and formally showing respect for the person, between expressing one's emotions and avoiding open conflict through compromising and consensus. *Lagom är bäst* (Lagom is best), which is similar to what Aristotle said, "virtue lies in the middle point".

In normal life, *lagom* renders into the paradoxical individual desire for being somehow different but without sticking out too much. Wille Crafoord in one of his songs phrases this Swedish peculiarity with a beautiful game of words *Alla vill vara annorlunda på ett likadant sätt* (Everybody wants to be different in a similar way). At the work level, this was confirmed in a study by Åkerblom (1995) who conducted a series of focus group interviews. When asked to state three advises to a manager, many participants said things like: "You should be just like everyone else", and "Do not think you are special, just because you are a manager!" Following the norm Swedish leaders remain behind the curtains, becoming invisible.

Förnuftstanken (Sense of Rationality)

Although not directly related to the dilemma existing between the individual and the community, a notable feature of Swedish mentality should not be forgotten: its sense of rationality. As Daun points out, the word 'rationality' is given a variety of meanings. Therefore, he goes on defining 'Swedish rationality' as setting the accent on practical solutions, on suitability to the pursued goal, on aiming to a single objective at a time (Daun 1989). Swedes adopt a practical orientation which other authors summarise with the term "pragmatism" (Czarniawska-Joerges 1993).

Aiming to a single objective at a time, *att gå rakt på sak* (to go straight to the point) is an often-heard expression when discussing something. When having to decide or to talk about several issues Swedes prefer to treat them one by one, and only when one question has been treated and something has been decided on it, may the discussion move to the next one. *Ordning och reda* (literally translated as 'order and order', amusingly using two words expressing the same thing!) would be an idiom eloquent of the same idea of not mixing matters.

Closely related to this concept of sequence and order lies the sharp separation between public and private time, between work and individual relations. Working life and family life are strictly held apart, very seldom blending friends with work-fellows. Likely, while working, no personal affairs should interfere. However, this division

between both spheres has also been interpreted as fulfilling a different function. Daun (1989) believes that "a function with this protecting border could be to defend integrity, and guarantee the individual feeling of independence from the outside world", which reminds of the positive connotations the word *ensamhet* had. Within the private sphere, the Swede is unmasked; any weakness is well known by the close friends and loved ones. Here is the place to relax from all outside demands. Here is the place where *att vara mig själv* (to be myself) as a Swede would put it.

The ideal of order and the sequential rationality is interpreted by Trompenaars as a sequential view of time and as specific degree of involvement in relations. However, this idea of sequence and order, which drives Swedes to make plans of what will be done and in what succession, may seem to go against Hofstede's conclusion of Sweden being a low uncertainty avoidance country.

So…?

How much can words tell us about the culture behind them? Karl E. Weick would answer with another question, how can I know what I think until I see what I say? Or, as he puts it somewhere else, "the words I say affect the thoughts I form when I see what I've said" (Weick 1995, p.90). Words and expressions are ready-made labels serving us to bracket and punctuate the ongoing flow of time. Language shapes and gives substance to whatever situations and activities the person encounters, framing our perceptions, thoughts and behaviours. Clifford Geertz answer to the question would lie in a similar line. Culture, he writes, is the "structure of meaning through which men give shape to their experiences" (cited in Kuper 1999, p.96). Culture, through the symbolic forms of language and rituals, tells us what the world is like and how we should act in it.

So, if words shape our thoughts and behaviours constructing our perception of the world, what do individual independence (*ensamhet*), personal strength (*ensam är stark*), individual freedom (*att vara i fred*), equality of rights (*jämlikhet*), social responsibility (*lagom*), resistance to conflict (*konfliktundvikande*), order (*ordning och reda*) and sequence (*att gå rakt på sak*) tell us about the Swedish character?

Individual independence and strength sketch a strong individualism in the background, but one that is respectful of the others' independence. Individualism in

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Sweden does not equate to egocentrism since as much as it is conscious of its own value as an individual, it is conscious of the value of the other as an individual. To make such independence possible, everybody has equal right to individual freedom (at least at the level of speech; what actually happen are matters of another story).

However, individual freedom is not an end in itself. The urge to contribute to the smaller or bigger community and to be socially responsible rises the issue about what to use individual freedom for. Freedom thus becomes a mean to serve society. It is not the plain end of using individual freedom for the joy of more earthly pleasures. Even one's identity is somehow defined by what one does: *man är vad man gör; man kan inte bara vara* (one is what he does; one cannot simply be). What one uses her freedom for, defines who she is. This might be some remains of the Puritanism influence on the Swedish character. Here is where Swedish pragmatism comes in. That activity that defines one self has to be ordered, sequential and effective. Who wants to be seen as a messy person who attempting to do many things at once accomplish none? Certainly not the Swede!

In that doing with the others, in that contributing for the narrow or broader group, in that being useful, the Swede looks for agreement and consensus, trait which has made them ideal as mediators in many international peace negotiations, but which can be frustrating for the less diplomat person. The search for consensus is sometimes referred to as avoidance or even fear for open conflict. Thorny issues might not be taken in front of others as a follow of such fear, or maybe (who knows!) as a desire to save face. Not in vain has been said that Swedes are the Japanese of Europe! (Daun 1989)

Individualism respectful of others and concerned for the social, where else could the Social Welfare system have developed like it did in this country? While realising of the value of the individual, they keep conscious of the need to satisfy a bigger collectivity if society is to work. Hence the subtle equilibrium of a socially concerned individualism, the search for consensus supporting such equilibrium. So, paraphrasing Weick, that is my answer to "how can I know what they think until I see what they say?"

A final reflection (on method)

The simple analysis of language is not enough to completely understand how a person of a given culture makes sense of the world around her. Biographical and contextual factors have also to be considered. Wittgenstein taught us that language is learnt in the course of one's life, by seeing how concepts are applied to a variety of situations (Johannessen 1998). Words are used with a variety of nuances depending on the context of use. No dictionary definition gives a recipe as to how a word should be used and interpreted. Besides, cultures, as languages, are dynamic, changing along time. That time is part of the context to consider when making sense of a word or an expression.

Not considering biography nor context nor the dynamism of language and culture makes the method used in the paper a not self-sufficient one. But it could be used as a complement to other methods. Participant observation for instance could give the researcher a deeper understanding of the culture by situating it, and in her analysis the study of language could be a tool among others.

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