Den amerikanska drömmen: Swedish Americans and their heritage language

Abstract

Emigration to the United States represents an important chapter in Swedish and American history. The fate of Swedish in the United States, however, has not been studied in much depth, except for the era of mass emigration and in the decades immediately afterwards, with descriptive studies of amerikasvenska (the varieties of Swedish spoken in America) such as Andreen 1900; Zetterstrand 1904; Berger 1912. Hedblom and Ordéus in the 1960s focused primarily on Swedish dialects spoken in the US. The recordings they made were useful in subsequent studies, like Hasselmo 1974, which analyzed American Swedish phonology, morphology, lexicon and syntax, interviewing persons born at the end of the 19th century, and examining the language’s contexts of use. The conclusion drawn from these studies was that Swedish was on its way to extinction. In 2003 Karstadt wrote a longitudinal study focused on Swedish-American English, examining linguistic material from more than seventy life-history interviews recorded in the Midwest over three decades: 1960s, 1980s and 1990s. Research concerning the descendants of immigrants continues to be ongoing with one of the projects being “Svenskan i Amerika” - whose aim is to describe spoken Swedish in the United States today.

The purpose of my sociolinguistics research was, instead, to observe the persistence of the Swedish language and culture in later generations in order to understand to what degree the descendants of immigrants still consider themselves to be part of the culture of origin, at a distance of many decades after the mass emigration ended. Given the impossibility of updating Hasselmo’s on-site interviews, I chose to use an online questionnaire submitted to the descendants of Swedish immigrants.

The participants (401 people, of whom 272 completed the survey) were randomly recruited in the United States via the Internet. The qualitative questionnaire consisted of four sections, with a total of 70 questions, where the participant self-evaluated their level of knowledge and gave information about the persistence of the Swedish culture. The analysis seems to confirm Hasselmo’s conclusion that Swedish has disappeared as a primary language in the United States, even in communities where it was traditionally spoken. Most of the participants (65%), in fact, had parents who did not have any knowledge of Swedish. However, 131 of them (48%) learned Swedish as a second language.

Participants show a positive attitude towards the language, and are in favor of its being taught in schools. Even after language shift they show a strong interest in Swedish language and culture, and still consider themselves to be ethnically Swedish.

References:


“Svenskan i Amerika”, a research project by Gothenburg University: <https://sites.google.com/site/svenskaniamerika/home/english> (last accessed 2017-01-03).